Love Stories of the Real West

RANCH ROMANCES

15c

Grant of Death

By RAY PALMER TRACY

JAMES W. ROUTH

S. OMAR BARKER

First May Number

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FEUD OF THE FOREST

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Grant of Death

By Ray Palmer Tracy

All his life Jerry had loved Jill Hammond, only to lose her to a bold and unscrupulous schemer. Would Jerry, who was a fighting man, take that?

CHAPTER I

Shattered Peace

IT WAS early morning after a night of strain in the little cowtown of Stony Ford, during which no one had slept. The results of the special election had just been announced. Jerry Curran, the tall, lean, gray-eyed young foreman of Lucky Kelly's Rafter M spread, slipped away from the court-house and went down the south side business street toward the hotel.

Solid, level headed Jim Brandon of the Spade, the candidate Jerry had put over practically single-handed, had won. He had defeated Ace Burkhard who had not only inherited the great Bar Cross outfit which filled the west

end of Stony Valley north of Deep Stony River, but aspired to step into the state senatorial shoes left vacant by the sudden death of his father.

Even more important to Jerry, the county had voted down the measure he had bitterly fought. The measure provided for the condemning of a right of way through the old Cramer Fur Company Land Grant at the head of the valley. Ostensibly, the measure had been sponsored by old Bill Hammond of the Wagon Wheel—something Jerry doubted, even though he was willing to concede the old man might be sincere.

Jerry felt satisfaction but no elation

over the victory. That was why he was ducking the victory parade for Jim Brandon forming at the court-house. The bitterly fought contest was leaving a trail of sore spots in Stony Ford. By the Ace Burkhard and road measure adherents, Jerry alone was considered responsible for their defeat.

Jerry passed Judge Snyder's law office over which Ace had used as headquarters. Heavy, rapid footsteps sounded on the plank walk behind him.

"Wait!"

Jerry whirled around. Ace Burkhard was following. Dressed in fine material, hand-turned boots, an ornate gunbelt and holster, and all topped off with a big white hat, he made a striking figure compared to Jerry's factory made clothes, scuffed boots, scarred belt and holster, and year before last's hat.

Ace halted a few feet away. His big hands clenched and unclenched. Under the tan, his heavy, handsome face was pale. His ice blue eyes blazed. Although Jerry was six feet tall, Ace overtopped him three inches and outweighed him twenty-five pounds. Yet, as they faced each other, neither trying to conceal his dislike, it was not the contrast in size and dress that was impressive. It was the clash of wills which was like a solid wall between them.

"Well?" inquired Jerry.

Ace turned his head. He glanced all around and at the hotel porch just beyond them and apparently unoccupied.

The corner of Jerry's wide mouth curled. Since he and Ace, at the age of seven eighteen years ago, had had their first fight down in the old Stony Ford schoolyard over who should carry Jill Hammond's books, it had been this way. Ace always reserved the depth of his hate and his direct threats to spill to Jerry privately. No one but themselves knew the extent of the chasm between them.

Ace saw Jerry's curling lip and understood. He lost another shade of color.

"You cheap cowpoke!" His voice shook with passion. "You've stuck your nose into my business once too often!"

Jerry nodded. He said: "So you've been remindin' me now and again." Then he added: "One thing I admire about you, Ace. You're such a sterling sport when you lose!"

Ace staggered as though Jerry had hit him. His hand jerked toward his gun. Jerry stiffened and stood poised. With an effort that left him trembling, Ace controlled himself.

"Not now!" he said. "But the time will come!" He turned and plunged back into Snyder's office.

Slowly Jerry went on toward the hotel. This clash was a thundering climax to the many battles they had fought through the years.

The boyhood of Jerry and Ace had been different, yet strangely similar. Ace had been born to wealth and prominence. Senator Burkhard had been a successful and highly respected man.

Like Ace, Jerry had been an only child. His father had owned a small, but solid spread south of Deep Stony. Like Ace, he had lost his mother during the great grippe epidemic of the double winter. Unlike Ace, whose father wore the mantle, it had been Jerry's mother who had been the power in the Curran family. With her gone, the Curran spread fell into decay. Jerry's father crossed the Great Divide when Jerry was sixteen. There was nothing left of the ranch. The boy had gone to ride for Lucky Kelly. He had now been Lucky's foreman for three years.

The second time Jerry fought Ace over Jill Hammond was at the age of twelve. That time he won the privilege of riding home with the lovely little girl with golden pigtails and flashing, wide-eyed smile. But Jerry did not win all his battles with Ace. When he went to ride for Lucky he suffered a terrific defeat. He lost Jill. It made no difference that Bill and Sadra Hammond had had an active hand in it. The result was the same. Jill was engaged to marry Ace.

As Jerry approached the hotel steps, he was wondering why Jill had post-

poned her marriage to Ace through two years of engagement. And Jill had had an undeserved share in the bitterness of the campaign just concluded. There had been open suggestions from the opposition that revenge was the real reason Jerry had fought Ace and the road measure so savagely.

At the top of the hotel steps, Jerry glanced along the porch. The porch was not empty, as he had thought. Jill Hammond was sitting in a low porch chair near the corner closest to Judge Snyder's office. Jerry's eyes flashed to the latticed porch rail, the corner column and the bushy vine entwined about it. It had been enough to conceal Jill.

"Hello, Jill," he greeted, sure from her expression that she had overheard his clash with Ace.

Jill rose from her chair. As in everything she did, it was a graceful move. Round and slender in her trim riding breeches, boots and soft shirt, she looked at Jerry. Her wide, violet eyes were accusing.

"Jerry," she said, "why do you always have to fight Ace over everything he does?"

Jerry's gorge rose. He did not stop to consider that Jill was engaged to marry Ace and Ace's interests were hers.

"Why is Ace always on the wrong side?" he demanded.

"What's wrong with his wanting to be senator like his father?" countered Jill hotly.

"Not a thing," conceded Jerry. "I'm sorry I was forced to cut you out of the social whirl at the capitol."

"I don't care a fig for the social whirl and you know it!" said Jill. Then: "If you're sorry, why did you fight Ace?"

"It was on account of the road measure he was trying to force through the old fur company land grant," explained Jerry.

"Ace didn't have a thing to do with the road measure," denied Jill. "It's Daddy Bill's pet. Who are you to stop progress in the valley?"

"The land grant straddles the river and butts its north side against the Bar Cross. The south side butts against the open range the Rafter M uses. The only progress I can figure is for Ace to get a county highway to progress Bar Cross cows across the river and swallow up the west end of the south side, the same as he's got the northwest end sewed up."

"I've heard Ace say time and again that he has all the range he wants," argued Jill. "Anyhow, he didn't have a thing to do with the road measure. It was Daddy Bill."

Jerry was irritated. He said: "So I heard. Old Bill gave Lucky a wealth of reasons why the road was his own project."

"Oh! Oh!" Jill drew back. One of the reasons Bill Hammond had advanced was that the land grant road would be a much shorter route for him and Sadra to take visiting Jill when she moved to the Bar Cross.

Jerry was instantly contrite, but refused to back up. He said: "You ask me, it's the soundest reason I heard."

"I still don't see why you're afraid Ace would move across the river if the road went through," Jill returned to the argument.

"Listen, Jill. You're due to find out that Stony Valley, or even the whole state, ain't big enough for Ace. He just can't bear to have anyone but himself even look like he might be successful."

"I know Ace as well as you do!" snapped Jill.

"We're running in circles," Jerry poured on oil. "The way we're quarreling, anyone would think it was you and I who are engaged to be married instead of you and Ace."

"God forbid!" said Jill.

"He already has! Or someone has!" Jerry was bitter and ready to quarrel again.

Before they had a chance to work back to good terms, the victory parade drew opposite. Someone got his eye on Jerry. Half a dozen men raced to the porch. Jerry was forced to join the

parade, the very thing he was trying to avoid.

A strange expression in her eyes, Jill watched him go. She realized Jerry did not want to parade. She thought of Ace and frowned. Had Ace been victorious, he wouldn't have missed a chance to gloat. Now he was somewhere sulking like a spoiled child.

Jill was not a native daughter of Stony Valley. She had lost her parents in a disastrous Mississippi flood. A lone, frightened little girl, desperately clutching a rag doll, she had been one of the dozens of orphaned children offered for adoption. Good fortune had sent her straight to the hearts of Bill and Sadra Hammond.

The middle-aged, childless couple on the Wagon Wheel legally gave her their name. The Hammonds were well-to-do and anything Jill wanted she got. Anyone but Jill would have been spoiled by the attentions showered on her.

Daddy Bill and Mother Sadra were delighted when Jill was thrust into girlish prominence by the struggle of the two outstanding boys of the valley to win her favor. They enjoyed it until Jill reached the 'teen age, and it seemed that Jerry Curran was holding the inside track.

They were glad when Jerry became tied to a job with Lucky Kelly at the west end of the valley. They wanted nothing but the best for Jill. It seemed to them that Ace Burkhard, even if a little spoiled, as the heir to wealth and the son of an honored father was far the better catch.

Realizing what she owed to Daddy Bill and Mother Sadra, Jill listened. She liked Ace, but was not sure she loved him. That was why the wedding had been postponed from time to time. Looking after Jerry as he joined the parade, she knew that he could stir her as Ace never had. Was that love? For a moment she missed her own dimly remembered mother. What would her counsel be?

Jill had promised to marry Ace as soon as he was elected senator—something neither of them doubted would happen. But Ace had not been elected. That should make no difference with the wedding plans. Yet she shrank from the finality of the wedding ceremony.

Thoughtfully, Jill sat down to wait for Ace and to watch the victors parade the street shouting and singing, while the losers looked on sullenly. Suddenly, she was on her feet clutching the porch rail. She tried to scream, but her voice stuck in her throat.

Diagonally across the street from the hotel was a flat-roofed, false-fronted feed store. Across the short space of roof visible to her, she glimpsed a tall, thin, hard-lined man, stooped nearly double, race toward the false front. In his hand was a gun.

The head of the parade, with Jerry well up in front, was just passing the feed store. Just as though a voice had shouted a warning, Jill knew what was going to happen. Yet she stood frozen, unable to utter a sound.

There came a flash and a heavy report from the top of the feed store. The head of the parade was in confusion. Someone was down. It wasn't Jerry! Jerry was racing for the feed store, gun in hand! Jill was so weak she had to keep clinging to the porch rail to hold herself upright.

Four men were carrying a still figure into the undertaking parlor. A furious search around the feed store revealed no trace of the murderer. The parade was over.

Jill saw Ace striding around the street, gesticulating and showing his indignation. He would soon come to her. But it was Jerry who came first.

"It was a new homesteader named Jack Pratt who got it, shot through the heart," he told Jill. "I thought you'd want to know."

"Any idea who did it?" The question nearly choked Jill.

Jerry shook his head.

"The shot came from the roof of the feed store, but the skunk got away. In this crowd, no one could find him."

"Was—was this Pratt standing close to you, Jerry?"

"Well, yes. In fact, he'd just taken me by the arm and said something I didn't hear in all the noise. I stepped back to ask him what it was, and the shot came."

"You think the shot was intended for you?" Jill's voice was faint.

"I don't know why anyone would want to shoot a harmless homesteader," he evaded.

"Jerry, you must be careful. You've made a lot of enemies." Jill paused while she decided not to mention the man she had seen on the feed store roof. Jerry might jump to a wrong conclusion. After all, the fact that there were several tall, thin, hard characters working for the Bar Cross really meant nothing.

"I'll be as careful as I can with folks taking pot shots at each other here and there," grinned Jerry lightly. "Lucky and I are starting home right away. Well," he was suddenly afflicted with awkwardness, "don't be sore at me, Jill. We just don't see things the same way."

"I'm not sore at you, Jerry," denied Jill. "And you'll be careful?" It seemed necessary to impress that on him.

"Sure I will." Jerry went down the steps and to a hitch-rack where his horse was tied. Lucky Kelly was already mounted and waiting.

Lucky Kelly, square, heavy-set, hair silvered with seventy years of weathering, puffed on a cob pipe as he and Jerry rode up the south river road toward the Rafter M at the upper end of the valley. From time to time he studied Jerry's face with his bright black eyes.

"That shot was meant for you, Jerry," he announced at last.

"I wouldn't wonder," admitted Jerry.

Lucky let it go at that. He said: "Thirty years ago when I was notified that I had inherited the Cramer Fur Company Land Grant, everyone laughed and named me Lucky Kelly. They didn't know how lucky I figgered I was to get that strip of rocks between the Bar Cross and the south side range."

"Scab land or not," commented Jerry, "I'd sure hate to have it laying there unfenced with its safe river ford. Might tempt the Bar Cross now it can't expand any more on the north side. I don't know yet how we convinced the valley there was a colored gent in the woodpile of that road measure."

"That shot ought to prove it to everybody," nodded Lucky. "It warn't fired because Ace missed bein' elected to the senate."

"No," agreed Jerry, "and I ain't overlooking the hard characters Ace inherited along with the Snell River Ranch on the other side of the Castle Mountains. Don't forget he moved

JERRY CURRAN

some of 'em over to the Bar Cross, including Beak Irish, the foreman."

"I was thinkin' of them tough jaspers," admitted Lucky. "I wouldn't be surprised if that shot was only the beginning."

Across the river to the north, the Castle Mountains, with their shaded, grassy slopes and rugged peaks, notched the skyline. The Monument Mountains, practically a duplication of the Castles, rimmed the south of the

valley. The sun shone warmly on the green fields and shaded, comfortable homes of the cow outfits strung along both sides of the river.

There were two safe, ledge-bottomed fords where Deep Stony River could be crossed. One was now bridged where the town of Stony Ford had sprung up. The other was on the old land grant, close to the gorge carved by the river—a gorge which separated the Castles and Monuments where they swung around the head of the valley.

Until after Senator Burkhard's death, no one had seen any necessity of a road and bridge across the old land grant. The outfits on the north ranged their stock in the Castles. Those on the south pastured the Monuments. All business was transacted in Stony Ford. The proposed new road would be little more than a Bar Cross highway.

Jerry's eyes went to Deep Stony River chuckling darkly over its shifting beds of treacherous quicksands. It seemed to have a different appearance than it had had yesterday. It had undergone a spiritual change. It was no longer a respected stream halving valley and town, something to be let strictly alone. It had become a new problem. The tranquil years since the echo of the last Indian warwhoop had died away were at an end.

Drearily, Jerry peered into the future. One man's ambition was lining up forces for a struggle. He turned to Lucky with a forced grin.

"Let's whistle, Lucky," he said. "I feel like we're about to pass a graveyard."

CHAPTER II

Postponement

JERRY and Lucky were on their way home when Ace Burkhard came down the street toward the hotel. Rage urged him to break into a run. But humiliation, the prospect of facing Jill after his loud assurances of an overwhelming victory, and her inevitable questions about the shot which had so narrowly missed Jerry, lagged his steps to a slower and slower beat.

"If Beak Irish knows about that shot, I'll break his damned neck!" he muttered savagely. Reluctantly, he dragged himself up the steps to go to the hotel parlor, where Jill had said she would wait with the other women sitting up to hear the election returns. As Jerry had done, he glanced along the porch and saw Jill in the porch chair.

Jill was watching him misty-eyed. Ace was nearer at that minute to claiming her than he had ever been. His bent head and lagging footsteps aroused her mothering instincts. Ace in humiliation and defeat was far more appealing than Ace the swaggering, conceited overlord. Words of consolation and cheer welled within her.

Ace did not notice. He made a swift survey of the latticed rail, the corner column and vine. Rage made him indiscrete.

"You said you'd wait for me in the parlor!" he accused harshly.

Jill's exalted mood was shattered. She said: "It was stuffy in the parlor."

"Were you here when—" Ace hesitated over finishing the question.

"Yes, I was here when you quarreled with Jerry. I was here when Jerry came to the hotel to get out of the victory parade. He was talking to me when the boys saw him and dragged him into the street. And I was here when Jack Pratt was shot," recited Jill, cleaning the slate rather than have Ace harp it out of her with suspicious questions.

"So big-souled Jerry was going to miss a chance to rub it in!" Ace leaped on that point. "I suppose you were simple enough to believe him?"

"Jerry never mentioned the parade," said Jill. "He didn't need to. I saw his face when the boys caught him. He was on his way to get out of sight when he stopped to talk with me."

"I wish to God you'd stayed where you said you'd stay!" Ace's voice rose. "Then that meddler wouldn't have been standing practically on top of Jack Pratt when he was killed! Know what folks are saying? They're trying to make out I couldn't take it. That I had someone try to kill Jerry and got Pratt instead! I ain't a complete fool! The one thing I couldn't afford would be to salt down that meddler right in the parade!"

The outburst relieved Jill.

"Of course you had nothing to do with it," she agreed quickly.

"Who's going to believe that when Jerry goes shouting around that I threatened him and you was a witness?"

"You don't know Jerry very well, do you, Ace?" Jill asked. "Jerry will never mention your threat or drag me into it."

"After you turned him down for me?" A sneer marred Ace's well formed mouth. It was the sort of revenge he would have taken. He couldn't imagine anyone not doing the same. "You wait and see!"

"It'll be a long wait," replied Jill with such assurance it angered Ace still more.

"You're still half in love with that pauper!" he accused.

"Don't be any more foolish than you can help, Ace!" Jill drew herself up. "Have you any idea who shot—Pratt?" She had nearly said "Jerry."

"No-o-o," said Ace.

Jill noticed his hesitation and her fears returned. She said: "I happened to glance up at the feed store roof just before the shot was fired. I caught a glimpse of a tall, thin man with a gun in his hand. Before I could do a thing, the shot came."

"You recognized him!" Fear and shock turned Ace rigid.

"No," said Jill, "but he reminded me of Beak Irish or one of those other men you brought over from the Snell River Ranch."

"Did you talk to Jerry afterwards?"

"Yes, but I didn't tell him what I'd seen."

Ace relaxed. Jill was loyal to him. His fears were groundless.

"Forgive me, Jill, for being so hard to get along with," he turned on the charm. "It's been a hard day and I'm upset. But it's water under the bridge now. There won't be quite so much triumph to our wedding next week. I can't make my acceptance speech to the voters and issue a general invitation to the wedding as we planned. However, we can have in a few friends. It will be just as binding."

Jill was silent. This was the moment she dreaded. At last she was aware she did not love Ace and could never be happy with him. But there were the Hammonds. She owed them so much, and they were set on the union.

"There won't be any wedding next week, Ace," she took the plunge. "I've got to have more time."

"Time so Jerry Curran can spread the news that I tried to have him killed and maybe put you on the witness stand to say a man that looked like Beak Irish was the one who shot Pratt!" accused Ace.

Jill was furious. She said: "A wife can't be made to testify against her husband! Is that what you mean? One more word like that and I'll hand back your ring!"

"I didn't mean it that way, Jill!" protested Ace. "Everyone knows you went with Jerry before I beat his time. If you put off the wedding again, it will look as though you suspected me."

Jill searched his face. There was something in what he said; but there was a false note, too.

"Get my horse and take me home," she said.

On the way up the river to the Wagon Wheel, Ace pleaded and raged by turns. But Jill was adamant about the postponement of the wedding. Daddy Bill and Mother Sadra would line up with Ace. The real struggle lay ahead. As they reached the Wagon Wheel, relief swept over Jill. Daddy

Bill and Mother Sadra had not returned from town.

"The folks are not here, Ace," she said. "So you can't come in. Anyhow, I'm tired and want to rest."

Ace scowled and then his face cleared.

"It's been a hard time for you as well as me," he conceded with surprising thoughtfulness. "I'm more disappointed about the wedding than the election. Perhaps you'll see things differently after you've had a sleep." He made no attempt to kiss her good night. Just waved his hand and turned back toward town.

Jill stared after him, wondering if this experience had really changed him. She rode on to the corral, but did not dismount. The Hammonds would be home soon, and she was not ready to face them. She turned her horse into a trail leading through a grove of trees to a deep pool in Wagon Wheel Creek, where she had spent many happy hours with Jerry after he had been forbidden the house by the Hammonds.

She turned her horse to graze in a patch of grass. Seating herself on a huge boulder beside the quiet pool, she tried desperately to find a way out of her troubles.

THE more Jerry thought about that shot, the more it puzzled him. He knew Ace thoroughly. Ace would lie and cheat, if it served his purpose. Yet Ace had plenty of personal courage and was clever. Even a child would know that causing the murder of the man responsible for his defeat would ruin Ace.

This line of reasoning brought Jerry to the conclusion that powerful forces were working beneath the surface of the valley. He might be wrong. He decided to say nothing until he had more proof.

"What you going to do?" Lucky broke in on his thoughts as they rode past the big, comfortable Rafter M house, past the bunkhouse and shop and dismounted at the corral.

"I'll have to think it over," evaded Jerry.

Lucky considered the answer. More and more Lucky, who had built a spread that was second only to the Bar Cross, had grown to depend on Jerry. His eyes swept over his broad acres and solid buildings and then turned across the treacherous Deep Stony River. Without looking at Jerry, he said: "That shot today made me realize that I'm getting old."

"You still make a hand in the saddle," protested Jerry.

"Yes. But my bones are beginning to yell that the old carcass has lost its springtime, summer, and fall. Winter has arrived, son. My mind turns a deaf ear. It congratulates me that I'm as young as I ever was—almost. It ain't only youth that puts off until tomorrow. Age is just as bad."

Jerry, caught by the earnestness of Lucky, did not know what to answer —nor even what the old man was driving at. So he kept silent.

"I've got a couple pieces of business I've got to go down to the capital to attend to. I've been puttin' 'em off because they're disagreeable. Keep tellin' myself there's plenty time. Today, I know it ain't so. Tomorrow I'm going to light out and attend to things before I get time to argue myself out of it. Take only a couple or three days. You be careful while I'm gone."

"I'll be careful," promised Jerry uneasily. Lucky never talked much, and what he was saying was so somber.

Lucky looked all around as though he feared eavesdroppers.

"You look out for Ace Burkhard," he warned, lowering his voice. "I've always figgered him for a polecat. I know his father was considered a tin god in the valley—with reason. But I know things about the senator. He's gone, and maybe I shouldn't say it. Still, facts is facts. I always figgered him for a polecat, too. Only difference between him and Ace is the old man

had to control himself in the early days and learned how to get what he wanted without stirring up the hornets. If Ace had the same training, he'd be the spittin' image of his paw. You look out!"

"I'll do the best I can," said Jerry. Strangely, his estimate of the senator had been much the same as Lucky's. Sensing the old man had more to say, Jerry eyed him expectantly.

"If I wanted to find out about that shot today," Lucky went on carefully, "I'd go back—way back to the time the senator served his first term at the capital. It was a drought year, yet he added Sam Keeper's S K outfit to the Bar Cross. It was a fair deal and he treated Sam fine. The mystery was where the money come from. Nobody else had any. And the Bar Cross kept right on growing, good and bad years, always on the level. You sure you ain't got a thing in mind to do about this?"

"Well," admitted Jerry, "I did figger on seeing if I could find out something about that shot. I don't think Ace knew it was going to happen. He's too smart for that."

"Yes. He's too smart." Lucky was pleased. "What else?"

"I thought I'd put a watch on the old land grant. I can't get it out of my head that that road was the issue of this election."

"Put Carp Holden on the job," advised Lucky. "He's been here for years. He knows what I think of the Burkhards and can keep his face shut. And you be careful!" Lucky started for the house.

Jerry noted with a pang the shuffle of age in Lucky's step. Yes, Lucky was growing old. Jerry hated to admit it. Since he had come to the Rafter M, Lucky, though a bachelor, had been more to him than his own father. He was just beginning to appreciate the fact.

Women had been scarce in Stony Valley when Lucky was young. He had been in middle life when he met and fell in love with a girl many years his junior. He had built this house for her. At least rumor had it that way. For Lucky had never asked the girl to marry him. A man of his own years, more handsome, wealthier and more prominent, Senator Burkhard, had taken her away from him.

Jerry thought of that now. How much of what Lucky had just said sprung from that deep hurt? For that matter, was history repeating itself? How much of his own suspicion against the Burkhards had basis in fact, and how much was due to Jill's golden head and flashing smile? Yet someone had taken a shot at him in the victory parade. And he remained convinced that the attempt on his life had to do with the defeated road measure.

Someone was working at the anvil in the shop. That would be Carp, the unofficial blacksmith on the spread. Jerry looked in the door.

Carp glanced up. He appeared like anything other than a blacksmith. He was small and wiry, his legs bowed to the fit of a horse, and his more than fifty birthdays seemed to have left him untouched, unless his skin was more leathery and the crow's feet around his eyes had deepened. Otherwise, he seemed to grow tougher with his mounting birthdays. And he could still ride 'em slick.

JILL HAMMOND

"I've got a new job for you, Carp," said Jerry.

Carp studied Jerry with a piercing quality that belied the faded blue color of his eyes.

"Jig come home and told us about that shot somebuddy took at you," he said, wiping his face with a grimy handkerchief.

"That's part of it, but we'll let it rest for the time," said Jerry. "I want you to go up to Silver Springs just this side of the old land grant and camp."

Carp took a black plug from his pocket and bit off a generous chew. He waited until he had it masticated to a pleasing pulp before he answered.

"Be all right if I get up in the middle of the night oncet in a while and see if the land grant fences is holdin'?"

"Yes. If you're right careful."

Carp stepped to the door and squinted at the sun. He gave a hitch to his belt. He said: "I'll get my rifle and what I need and move up right away." He headed for the bunkhouse.

NXIOUS as Ace Burkhard was to get old Bill and Sadra Hammond to put pressure on Jill to force her to go through with the wedding as planned, he was still more anxious over the shot that had killed the nester, Jack Pratt. Like most of the valley, he was sure the shot had been fired at Jerry Curran. He couldn't understand it.

Jill's description of the man who had fired the shot coincided with his own suspicions. Some of his outfit were acting without his orders. It angered and upset him. When Jill suggested that he go home, he seized the excuse. He was in a fever to get back to town and get hold of Beak Irish.

Ace walked his horse down the south side business street of Stony Ford and crossed the bridge to the north side. At the hitch-rail of the Oasis Saloon, the chief hangout of the Bar Cross riders, he saw the rangy buckskin belonging to Beak. With it were tied the mounts of Buzz Sanford, Rek Ansen and Pot Neven—three of the men Beak had brought with him from the Snell River Ranch when he came over to be foreman of the Bar Cross for Ace.

Pot was squat and rotund, with little eyes set deep in a broad, expressionless face. He was as able and as conscienceless a gunman as Buzz and Rek. But the last two were tall and thin with hatchet features. Close up Buzz, with his pale eyes and thin mouth, and Rek, with his nearset green eyes, and slight hitch to his step due to a bullet, bore little resemblance to Beak Irish, whose nose was huge and curved and whose eyes were icy gray. But at a distance, any of the three might be mistaken for the other.

After what Jill had seen, one of these three, Ace was sure, had fired the shot at Jerry Curran and killed Jack Pratt. He looked at the horses and struggled with his temper. This was a time to keep cool.

If that shot had killed Jerry, no one had to tell Ace that he would have found himself friendless in the valley. His escape had been more narrow than Jerry's since, in his opinion, no one would miss Jerry.

Getting himself in hand, Ace stepped down. He tied his horse to the hitch-rail and pushed through the swinging doors into the big room.

A number of men were lined at the bar. All were either his own men or dependent on his favors. His rage rose again. Only for that attempt on Jerry's life, the place would have been filled with both factions.

The noise in the room stilled. It was a silent accusation against him who was innocent — innocent of the shooting, anyway.

"Set 'em up for the boys, Pat," he called to Pat Marvel, the saloon owner who was tending bar. "They all did their best for the cause. Trouble was, we weren't heavy enough."

It was the right thing to say. The

tension eased and the talk started again. After a couple of rounds of drinks, Ace said to Pat: "I want to use your office a minute."

"Go ahead," invited Pat.

Ace walked toward the door in the back. He jerked his head at Beak. Beak followed him through the door into the office. Ace did not look at him again until he had closed the door and gone around to the other side of the flat-topped desk in the middle of the room. He leaned his fists on the desk and looked Beak in the eye with the impact of something solid.

"Well?" purred Beak in a soft tone. His face was blank, but his cold eyes were watchful. His long hands dropped close to the butts of the black-handled guns swung in holsters from crossed belts. He was calculating coolly as to whether Ace had placed himself on the other side of the desk to keep himself away, or to keep his foreman at a distance.

"What the hell did you try to kill Jerry Curran for?" The words flowed out in a hot stream.

"Who said I tried to kill Jerry Curran?" demanded Beak without changing expression or the softness of his tone.

"If you didn't do it, you know who did!" accused Ace.

"In the first place, no one tried to kill Jerry Curran," denied Beak.

Ace's face expressed his utter disbelief.

"Jack Pratt was no more a nester than you are," said Beak. "He'd grown a mustache and was older, but a couple of us Snell River boys recognized him. He knew it, too, and joined the parade to get out of reach. He had to be stopped before he had a chance to spill anything to Jerry Curran. Maybe he did anyway."

"Who was he?" demanded Ace.

"He's the man who was closing in on the Snell River gang when your old man framed him into the penitentiary," said Beak.

"Reed Ankin!" Ace whispered the name. "Jack Pratt was Reed Ankin!"

"Be mighty careful how you mention that name," warned Beak. "But that's who he was. Things in his cabin proved it. They got burned while the fuss was going on over the shooting."

Ace's temper flared again.

"Why did you have to shoot him so it looked like you was trying to down Jerry Curran?"

"Still accusin' me of firing that shot?"

"Who did, if you didn't?"

"It was Rek. Ankin had enough on Rek to send him to the gallows." Then Beak added: "I gave Rek the nod to go ahead." It was an experimental reach for the driver's reins. Ace recognized it as such.

"You took a lot on yourself," he said. "I'll think it over. Maybe I'll call the whole thing off!"

"No you won't!" The denial was flat. "You couldn't call it off if you tried. Your old man let you in for this when he sent Ankin to jail instead of quieting him for good. If you'd walked into the senate like you said you could, where you'd have had your hand on things, we'd be all set. You'd have made it, if you'd let that road business slide for a while."

"It was Jerry Curran who beat me!" snarled Ace.

"Sure it was. And he ain't going to be fooled long by the shot that killed Pratt, even if Pratt didn't manage to spill anything to him. Rek shot Pratt quick as he could. It was just our good luck everyone thinks the shot was meant for Jerry Curran. Draws attention away from Pratt."

"Good luck!" Ace's temper slipped again. "Everyone thinks I fired that shot!"

"What of it?" Beak raised his eye brows. "The minute you lost the election, the screen was yanked from in front of you. Take one look at it. Sooner or later you'll be seen, unless—!"

In that minute, Ace matured. His mouth shut in a hard line. He had not

thought of what faced him in that light. Beak was right. There was nothing but the past glory of his father to protect him, unless—!"

"We'll have to get rid of Jerry Curran!" He put in words what both he and Beak were thinking. The calmness that had been denied him all day descended on him.

"We better get back to the Bar Cross and make plans," Beak reached for a firmer grip on the driver's reins.

Ace leaned over the desk and bent a cold eye on his foreman.

"Don't forget for one holy minute that I'm running this show!" he said.

Beak tried to meet his eyes, but failed. Ace, now that his uncertainty was gone, was the stronger. Beak nodded his head in recognition of it.

"Sure you're the boss," he agreed.

"Gather up the boys and go out to the ranch," ordered Ace. "I'll be out sometime tomorrow."

Beak turned on his heel and went out. Ace stayed a minute in the office facing the bitter future he had carved for himseelf. But he had not lost yet. With Jerry out of the way and himself married to Jill, he had a good chance to win all along the line. Squaring his shoulders, he walked into the saloon from the office. Beak and his riders were already on their way to the Bar Cross.

CHAPTER III

The Back Trail

JERRY turned in and slept until well into the afternoon. He awoke puzzling over what Jack Pratt had been trying to say to him when the bullet cut him down. It was queer that Pratt should pick a time like that to talk to him. It smacked of the necessity of haste.

But for a few days, Jerry had little time to devote to the mystery. Lucky was away and things had been neglected at the ranch during the campaign. Jerry applied himself to getting things in shape once more. However, as soon as Lucky returned from the capital, he took an afternoon off, saddled his horse and started for town.

As he rode out the gate, where the tree-shaded Rafter M lane joined the river road, a short, broad, bearded prospector, driving a burro ahead of him, was measuring strides up the valley. The burro was heavily packed. A rifle, a pick, shovel and goldpan were on top.

The man stopped and peered at Jerry. His dull eyes were all but hidden in the bushy matt of the sorrel beard which concealed his features.

"You're Jerry Curran, foreman for Lucky Kelly's Rafter M," he stated. "I seen you in town yistidy. You comin' out now saved me a trip up the lane."

"Yeah?" inquired Jerry.

"My name's Wiregold Jones. It's me who found the Golden Star mine, even if I did git beat out of it." He stopped and peered at Jerry expectantly.

"Is that so!" Jerry was accommodatingly intrigued. He had never heard of Wiregold Jones nor the Golden Star mine.

"Yep, that's who I be," he said. "Know what? I'm on my way to locate a richer mine. Ten years ago I picked up some picture gold float richer'n cod-liver ile—up there." He waved his staff at the mountains at the head of the valley. "I'm goin' to find the ledge it come from. Got 'er figgered out."

"Fine," approved Jerry.

"I'm tellin' you," Wiregold went on, "because I've found it safer to let folks know who I be when I work on cow range. Oncet, a cowhand took a shot at me. You tell the Rafter M boys I'm only Wiregold Jones."

"I'll tell 'em," promised Jerry. "But you needn't worry. Our range is rustler proof. You'll see only an occasional rider sizing up the grass or moving a bunch of stock to better feed."

Wiregold Jones nodded.

"Go 'long, Lightnin'!" He woke the

burro with a whack of his staff. Slowly he ambled up the road.

"No gold up there. He's plumb loco." Jerry shrugged his shoulders and rode down the valley.

An hour's ride brought him to the boundaries of the Wagon Wheel. It was always a hard place for him to pass. Jill was there. The pull had not eased during the two years she had been engaged to Ace.

At a trail branching from the highway and circling around a stand of timber to the shady pool in Wagon Wheel Creek, he stopped. It was by the pool that Jill had told him it was useless for him to come any more.

Jerry had known nothing about the plan to announce Jill's wedding date when Ace made his acceptance speech. And after what had happened at the election, hope was rising in Jerry. Impulsively, he reined into the trail.

There was one spot on the way to the pool where through a V in a range of low knolls the yard of Hammond house could be seen. Jerry glanced through the V and halted.

The big thoroughbred Ace rode was standing in the yard with trailing reins. No use going on to the pool. Jerry was turning back when Ace and Jill came into sight. With them were old Bill Hammond and Sadra.

A violent argument was in progress. It was directed at Jill, accompanied by hand waving. Then Jill talked while the others listened impatiently.

"Hang on, Jill! Hang on!" prayed Jerry.

Suddenly, Ace snatched up the reins of his horse and flung himself into the saddle. He threw in the hooks and thundered down the lane to the road at a hurricane pace eloquent as furious cursing.

Jill started for the house. Old Bill and Sadra followed, still waving their hands.

Jerry wiped the sweat from his face. He could even grin. Ace and Jill had quarreled and Jill had won. Given time enough, Jerry thought he could expose Ace so even the Hammonds would realize the mistake they were making.

Perhaps Jill would come to the pool where it was quiet, to cool off after the contest. Hopefully, Jerry rode up the trail.

Stepping down at the pool, Jerry went around to the big boulders on the other side, where he and Jill used to meet. He sat there until the sun hung low. Jill did not come. Disappointed, he mounted and rode on to town.

ON THE day Pratt was killed, when Jill went to the pool she was really putting off facing Daddy Bill and Mother Sadra. She waited until long after dark before she mounted her horse and rode back to the corral.

There was a light in the kitchen and in the living-room. Through the living-room window she saw Bill and Sadra waiting for her, although they had been up all the night before.

Daddy Bill, his long, lean frame frame hunched in his favorite chair, was feeling the gray stubble of his beard with gnarled fingers. His thin hair was ruffled and his old eyes were troubled. Mother Sadra, comfortably wide and heavy, her pink face unmarked by wrinkles other than the one between her first and second chins, was walking restlessly around the room straightening things that needed no straightening. Every once in a while she stopped and faced Bill. Her small mouth opened and closed rapidly and then clamped in a tight line.

Feeling guilty, Jill slipped in the back door. The rich scent of food thoughtfully kept hot on the stove reminded her that she had not eaten all day. Careful to be quiet, she ate a good supper. Thus fortified, she went through the hall and would have gone upstairs to her room. But Sadra called.

"Come in a minute, Jill. I thought

I heard you in the kitchen, but I didn't hear Ace. Why didn't he come in a minute? The poor boy must be feeling dreadful."

Jill saw that Mother Sadra had made the mistake of thinking that she had just returned from town. She saw no reason for telling her differently.

"I was tired and sent him home," she said.

"Of course you're tired, you poor child!" Sadra gathered Jill to her ample bosom. "But don't you feel bad because Ace lost out and Daddy Bill's road measure was beaten. Now I guess you see what kind of a man Jerry Curran is!"

Jill hid her face against the loving but mistaken shoulder.

"It's been a hard day," she said, wondering if she was a hypocrite for not explaining farther.

"Indeed it has," agreed Sadra quickly. "The excitement of the election and the disappointments and all. You need plenty of rest so you'll look your pretty best at the wedding next week."

"There isn't going to be a wedding next week!" Jill braced herself.

Sadra shoved her away and looked at her. Her voice was sharp: "You mean Ace changed his mind because of his defeat?"

"Not Ace. It was me."

"You let Ace down because he didn't win?" demanded Bill, rising to his thin height. "I never heard of such a thing! You can't do that! Me and Mother Sadra won't allow it!"

Jill straightened up. After all, this was her life that was being disposed of. She said steadily: "I'm never going to marry Ace until I know who it was who tried to kill Jerry Curran, and why!"

"Jill!" In her earnestness, Sadra shook the girl. "You're not standing there and hinting that you think a fine young man like Ace had anything to do with some one taking a shot at that scalawag of a Jerry Curran!"

"Jerry Curran isn't a scalawag!" denied Jill. "And someone tried to kill him! I've got to know who it was!"

"A lot of people might want to kill a trouble-maker like Jerry," said Bill.

"Name me one person who had a reason to kill him," invited Jill.

"I don't know," admitted Bill. "But a scalawag like Jerry, mixed up with a bad element, might be in any kind of trouble."

"Lucky Kelly, Al Williams, Bert Shaw, Reverend Cooper and Professor Cartwright," Jill named the cream of valley society, "supported Jerry. Are they the bad element? Snuff Akers and Pen Lund, who served terms for horse stealing, and all the gamblers and saloonkeepers on both sides of the river supported Ace and your road measure, Daddy Bill. They the good element?"

"What's come over you, Jill?" Sadra loudly rescued Bill. "You don't mean you think Ace tried to kill Jerry? That's nonsense. Daddy Bill says Ace was in Judge Snyder's office when it happened."

So Daddy Bill and Mother Sadra had taken the precaution of reassuring themselves on that point. It showed more concern about the shot than was being admitted.

"Yes, I know Ace didn't fire the shot," she said. "But I'm not so sure he don't know who did! Until I do know, there's going to be no wedding!" There. It was out with a finality that even the older Hammonds recognized.

"You're upset, Jill," soothed Sadra. "You'll see things differently, after you've had a sleep. Kiss me and go to bed."

Jill went upstairs. Swiftly she pulled off her boots and slipped back to the head of the stairs in her stockinged feet. It was a desperate situation when she was willing to eavesdrop. But she had to know if anything was being held back from her.

Down in the living-room, Bill and Sadra Hammond faced each other.

"If you ask me," came Daddy Bill's tired voice, "Jill is in love with Jerry Curran. Maybe—"

"You hush such talk!" Sadra cut him off. "Jill is too young to know what's good for her."

"Well," argued Bill, "you was only nineteen, younger than Jill, when you defied your paw and maw and married me."

"That's different," pointed out Sadra. "Girls of my day were older and more settled. These modern girls ain't got no idea what they want."

"Maybe you're right," Bill allowed himself to be outtalked, to Jill's great disappointment.

"Of course I'm right," Sadra clinched it. "Jill don't really want to marry a nobody like Jerry Curran with his seventy-five a month, when she can have all the money in the world and the position Ace can give her." She paused and then asked as though the question was forced out of her: "Who do you think tried to kill Jerry?"

"I wish I knew," admitted Bill. "Ace is hot-headed. He might have snapped out something to one of his men who thought he could make a hit with the

ACE BURKHARD

boss by downin' Jerry. And Jill was right about one thing. Some pretty tough jaspers supported Ace."

Jill heard Bill pick up the lamp and hurried back to her room.

"So Jerry is a nobody," she whispered to her pillow. "But when the votes were counted, Jerry had more friends than Ace and Daddy Bill combined."

By common consent, nothing was said about Ace and Jerry during the next few days. On the surface, things had returned to normal. That they were just waiting to break out in a new spot was proven when Ace came out to the Wagon Wheel. Backed by Bill and Sadra, he tried to force Jill to name a wedding day. But Jill stood firm. No wedding until the mystery of the shooting was cleared up.

Soon as Ace went rocketing down the lane in one of his fits of temper, Jill left the house and stole up the trail toward the pool. She caught a glimpse of Jerry and drew back out of sight. She was still wearing Ace's ring. As long as she wore that, she dared not be around Jerry.

She waited down the trail until she heard Jerry ride away. Then she went to the pool and crumpled down on the rock where he had been sitting.

Jerry rode into town. First, he called at the undertaking parlors. Jack Pratt had already been buried.

Nate Burlson, jovial-looking for his profession with his round face and bright smile, said: "The nester had money enough in his pocket to care for him. Sheriff Ben Wherli went out to his homestead and searched his cabin. Funny thing. There wasn't even a letter or a scrap of paper to tell where he came from."

Still convinced that the homesteader had taken the bullet intended for him, Jerry went to the lumber yard and got hold of ungainly Sid Mason, who had gone to school with him and Ace. Sid had been right behind Jack Pratt in the parade.

Sid was tall as Jerry, but slow in action and speech.

"I can guess what you've come for," he drawled. "You want to know if I heard what Pratt tried to tell you just before he was killed. I've been wondering about it. It don't make sense."

"It might make sense if all the loose

ends are gathered up," said Jerry. "What did he say, and how did you know I was going to ask?"

"Some of the northside boys have been over trying to pump me," answered Sid. "I told 'em I didn't hear. After all, Pratt was talking to you, not to them. Pratt said: 'Soon as the parade ends, come to room four in the hotel. I've got to talk to you and do it quick.'"

"That all?" Jerry was disappointed.

"In one way it sounds like mighty little," admitted Sid. "In another way, it's plenty."

It took Jerry a minute to catch Sid's meaning.

"You mean Pratt knew something he was going to tell me, and was killed by interested parties before he had a chance—that that bullet wasn't aimed at me at all?"

"What else can you make of it?"

"You haven't told anybody, not anybody at all?"

Sid shook his head. "I didn't think it was healthy."

"This changes the whole setup," said Jerry. "I'm going over on the north side and talk to Art Spray in the Spray Mercantile."

"Keep your eyes open," warned Sid. "Something is going on we don't know about. Art voted right, but it wouldn't be good business for Art if those on the north side knew he supported you. Besides, it's getting dark."

Jerry merely grinned at the warning, mounted his horse and crossed the bridge to the north side.

The main business street of Stony Ford, the municipal buildings and most of the people lived on the south side. But there were a couple of stores, a blacksmith shop and two saloons on the north side, besides a number of dwellings.

Art was alone in his barnlike building when Jerry entered. He had lighted the hanging lamps, and the store was a contrast of shadows and bright spots.

"You were here, Art, when Lucky Kelly, Senator Burkhard and my father were young men," Jerry said in a low tone.

Art nodded his bald dome and waited, his birdlike eyes fixed on Jerry.

"A few funny things happened in those days, I hear," suggested Jerry.

"Lucky's been talkin'!" growled Art testily. "You mean the way the senator bought ranches right and left when everyone was broke, and he ought to have been?"

"That's it." Jerry leaned on the counter. "Where would you look for an answer?"

"I'd stick to the Rafter M and mind my own business," advised Art. "You go looking for toes to step on and you'll get buried like Pratt did."

So Art as well as Sid thought Pratt was killed intentionally. He asked: "Then you think that shot dates way back?"

"I didn't say so."

"Where would it date to?"

"I ain't sure. But if you want to get out of this cast-iron valley of tears for good, you might go over to the town of Harp in the Snell River country and ask about it in a loud voice."

"Thanks, Art. I thought maybe that was it. I just now—"

"Nope, I ain't got it no more than they've got it over in the Emporium on the south side!" broke in Art firmly. "I'll get a catalog and you can order from that."

"Hell! I can order from the Emporium that way," Jerry played up. Someone was coming in the door. He turned and casually glanced at the heavy figure. It was Pike Hansen. "Hello, Pike," he greeted and turned back to Art. "Get your cussed catalog and let's have at it. I've got to get home."

Art brought out a hardware catalog and opened it to the stoves. "There's the very one Lucky picked out last year," he said.

"All right, order it," grunted Jerry. "I wish Lucky would buy his own furniture. I have to be housewife as well as stockman." He started to go.

"Wait a minute," Pike stopped him. "Pat Marvel seen you ride by the Oasis. He wants to talk to you. Asked me to come tell you. Let's walk over."

Something warned Jerry not to go. Pat was a Burkhard man. He couldn't have anything to say to him. But Jerry was curious. It didn't look as though anything would be pulled right in the edge of the evening, especially with Art Spray as a witness as to where he went and with whom.

"All right," he agreed. He followed Pike out of the store and walked down to the Oasis in the next block, leading his horse. He dropped the reins in front of the saloon and went in.

The instant he stepped through the swinging doors he knew he had blundered. At the bar stood Rek, Buzz and Pot. They were arranged so he would have to step between two of them to talk to Pat, who was behind the bar.

"Have a drink, Jerry." Cordially, Pat sat a bottle and glass on the bar between Buzz and Pot.

Just as sure as he stepped between those killers, Jerry knew his doom would be sealed. The way Pike was hurrying out the back door was added proof.

"You sent word, Pat, that you wanted to talk to me," he stalled without moving from where he had stopped near the door. "What about?"

"Only that now the election is over, it's time to bury the hatchet. I just invited you over to drink with a few of us and forget the mud throwing. Help yourself." He waved a fat hand at the bottle.

"Sorry," regretted Jerry. "I've quit drinking. I'll take a rain check on this one. Might start h'istin' e'm again some day."

Pat dropped behind the counter. The Bar Cross riders went for their guns. Jerry bounded backward, his hand speeding for his holster.

Four guns roared as Jerry crashed through the swinging doors. The wind of a bullet fanned his right ear. The wood of the doors splintered under a hail of lead. But Jerry was untouched. He was also aware that he had missed Buzz, his own target.

He hit the plank walk and bounded into the street. A leap carried him into his saddle. In a concealing cloud of dust he tore away from the saloon and thundered across the bridge to the south side.

Sid came running out of the shadows.

"You all right, Jerry?" he asked.

"Through the good luck of fools, yes," replied Jerry soberly. "Anyhow, I've discovered one thing. Some one didn't believe you when you claimed you didn't hear what Jack Pratt said. And they figger I heard it too."

"It's too late now," regretted Sid, "but I'd have done better if I'd told everyone I saw what Pratt said."

CHAPTER IV

Outlaw Country

IT SEEMED to Jerry that the battle would bring the whole town rushing to the scene. But shots by celebrating cowboys were common. Besides, it was on the north side, admittedly the wild part of town.

Sheriff Wherli came up the street from the court-house. He passed Jerry and Sid, nodded and went on.

The calm acceptance by the sheriff that the town was just shaking down to a normal gait after the election, made Jerry realize how alone he was. The opposition was equipped with full knowledge, while he had only suspicions and ancient echoes to guide him. Even men like Sid, Lucky and Art could be of little help to him.

"Sid," he said, "when I fought Ace and the road measure, I came so near uncovering something else, someone thinks I did uncover it and is trying to get rid of me before I can spill the beans."

"It comes back to Jack Pratt," said Sid.

Jerry nodded. "The way it looks to me, Jack Pratt knew he was doomed. He was shot to prevent him from telling me why. And don't forget that whoever fired that shot knows Pratt said something. He'll figger both of us heard it."

"I ain't forgetting it." Sid patted a shoulder holster fitted smoothly under his coat.

"Well, watch your step and stay away from me unless you hear something I ought to know. After what happened tonight, I'm poison." Jerry started for home. Carefully he watched the deepening shadows on both sides of the street.

He was passing one of the last houses in town when a voice called softly from a gate in a neat hedge: "Come here a minute, Jerry."

Jerry pulled over to the gate and looked down on a dark, dusk-blurred, slender girl, Nellie Carver.

Nellie, like Jill, had gone to school with Jerry, Ace and Sid. She was a pretty girl with soft brown hair and eyes. Her mother was the Stony Ford seamstress and there never was money enough. Life was easier now that Nellie was earning good pay as a waitress in the Stony Ford Café.

"I saw you ride into town, Jerry. I've been waiting for you to come back," said Nellie. "Step down a minute."

Wonderingly, Jerry dismounted. Holding the reins in his hand, he went to the gate.

"It's something I heard in the café." The girl lowered her voice to a whisper. "It worried me."

"What was it?" Jerry leaned forward to hear.

"Those Bar Cross men, Rek, Buzz and Pot, were in the café for supper tonight. They'd been drinking and took one of the booths. One of them, I think it was Pot, said: 'The boss is right. Our best bet is to get him in the Oasis. We can't take a chance on what Ankin told that meddler.' One of the others said: 'Shut up! Don't mention names, you fool!' That was all. But I've heard you called a meddler so many times since the campaign started, I thought they might be talking about you. But who is Ankin?"

"I wonder," said Jerry. Somewhere he had heard that name before. One thing was clear. Ankin must be the man buried as Jack Pratt. He didn't tell Nellie. Knowledge of that sort was dangerous.

"I thought I heard shooting across the river while I was waiting for you —and I was scared," Nellie went on.

"You see I'm still here," said Jerry lightly. He didn't want to burden her with the knowledge either. He laid his hand on hers. "You're a swell girl, Nellie," he said.

They were so engrossed, neither saw the buckboard coming down the dust-padded street until it was passing them.

"That's your Jerry Curran! See him kissing Nellie Carver?" The voice was that of old Bill Hammond. He and Jill were driving into town to get the mail from the late stage. Jerry's horse, with four white feet and a forehead star gleaming in the gloom, had identified him.

"Oh!" Nellie's voice was sharp in protest. "How could he say a thing like that?"

"I reckon we did look mighty confidential, whispering over the gate," said Jerry. "If old Bill thinks that's what he saw, let him make the most of it. And, Nellie, there's a lot of things the election didn't settle. What you've told me has helped a lot. But don't breathe a word to anyone else."

Jerry stepped up on his horse and left.

"If I'm a meddler," he muttered, "they'll have to coin a new word to fit old Bill Hammond."

Jerry didn't believe there was danger of anyone waylaying him on the road to the Rafter M. It was a different thing to bushwhack a man from trapping him into a fight in a public place, where all the witnesses would swear that he had asked for it. Still, he felt

easier when the moon came up and flooded the country with silvery light.

When he reached home, he put his horse in the barn. As he left the stable, a slight noise at the corner of the building changed the step he was taking into a leap. A gleaming knife swished through the spot where he had appeared and thudded into the door-jamb.

Jerry pulled his gun and dashed around the corner of the barn. He caught a glimpse of a tall, thin man

LUCKY KELLY

leaping over a cut bank of a gulch just back of the main corral. Then came the furious beat of hoofs.

Jerry sprinted to the gulch. His assailant was already out of sight up the curving wash. He ran back to the barn to get his horse. Then he realized his man would be lost in the twisting hills before he could get saddled. He pulled the heavy knife from the door-jamb.

It was just a well-balanced weapon that could be bought from any catalog. He went on to the house. He had to talk to Lucky about this.

Lucky was in the office. His eyes lighted on the knife as Jerry entered.

"Going to butcher?" he asked as Jerry sat down in a chair well away from the window opening toward the hills.

Jerry told him what had happened during the evening, skipping only Bill Hammond and Jill passing the gate when he had been talking to Nellie Carver.

"Ankin?" repeated Lucky thoughtfully. "About fifteen years ago there was a man by that name, an association man, who was accused of taking a bribe and got sent to the penitentiary. Claimed he was framed, of course. They all do."

"I remember that." It was the thing Jerry had been trying to recall. "It happened over in the Snell River country. Maybe he was framed. If he was, and it turns out that Jack Pratt was Ankin looking for revenge, it would explain why he was killed and these attempts on my life."

"What you going to do about it?" asked Lucky.

"I'm going to the Snell River country and find out about Ankin."

Lucky shook his head. "You'd never live to get there!"

"Yes I will," argued Jerry, "if I go over the Castle Pass and start right now. Who'd think I'd start out right on the heels of two attempts on my life? Anyway, by the look of things, I'll be just as safe over in the Snell River country as around here."

"Maybe," agreed Lucky reluctantly. "The bold course is usually the best. Cut through the old land grant and swing around to the pass right through the Bar Cross." The bright black eyes sparkled. "If I was ten years younger, I'd go with you. You be careful, Jerry!"

"I'll be careful."

Jerry went out to the corral and saddled a big bay. No white on him as a marker. He was even branded with an out of the valley brand—the Circle. He led the horse to the house, got his trail roll and enough rations to last him a week.

"I'll look for you when I see you," Lucky said. "You be careful," he warned again. "I'm old. I can't afford to lose you—not with a nephew like I've got."

It was one of the few times Jerry

had heard Lucky mention Linus Kelly, his brother's son. Linus had made a bad record; was even suspected of being connected with the Snell River gang of outlaws. It made Jerry uncomfortable.

"I'll be careful," he promised again and rode away.

"Damn Senator Burkhard and his git to the deepest hell!" swore Lucky as he went back into the house. "If anything happens to my boy, I'll salivate Ace—Etta's son—if they hang me so high the sun will shine on the soles of my boots!"

Jerry rode to the spot where Carp was camping.

"Over here, Jerry," Carp called from behind him.

Jerry rode over to a little thicket. Carp stood there waiting for him.

Jerry gave him an outline of what he proposed to do.

"So Pratt was really Ankin," said Carp. "I seen Ankin's picture in the paper when he was convicted. That explains why Pratt looked familiar to me. He was older and had growed a mustache, but it was him all right. Let's see. His first name was Reed—Reed Ankin."

"Everything quiet here?" asked Jerry.

"No one has tried to move any cows across the old land grant onto us," answered Carp.

"I don't think anyone will try till they get me salted down," reflected Jerry. "By the way, did you see a prospector pass here with a burro this afternoon?"

"Wiregold Jones?" grinned Carp. "I seen him. Ought to be named Haywire Jones. He went up to the head of Indian Creek."

Keeping to the shadows as much as possible, Jerry crossed the land grant and forded the river.

The shortest route to the pass over the Castles was through the Bar Cross yard. Jerry made a wide detour and came into the pass trail from the west.

It was easy traveling in the bright moonlight, and he made good time. The trail seemed to have enjoyed a lot of travel lately. There were plenty of cow tracks along the way, but that meant little in a range section.

He approached the pass with care. But he encountered no one. He did notice that a bunch of cows had been taken through the pass from the Stony Valley side within the last few hours. He gave it no thought. Tracks pointing the other way were the kind to interest him.

Cautiously he eased down the trail on the north slope of the pass. He was now definitely in outlaw territory.

The Snell River country had been notorious since the early days. A wide, rugged section filled with fine grazing, it should have been a cowman's paradise. But bordered by badlands and many hidden avenues leading to still more remote country, it was built to order for rustlers.

Association men and sheriffs went into Snell River country and never returned. Senator Burkhard had been indefatigable in his efforts to stamp out rustling. But as soon as he gained control of one part of the country and cleaned out the outlaws, the fester broke out somewhere else.

Piercing together the things he had gathered from different sources, Jerry thought he had ample evidence to cast doubt on Senator Burkhard's honesty as well as doubt on Ankin's guilt. Ankin must have been closing in on the gang when he was cut down.

Jerry smelled smoke and pulled up. Below him, he caught the faint, low rumble of a resting herd. He reined his horse from the trail and made a wide loop, returning to the trail well down the mountain.

Dawn found him in the foothills west of the trail. He holed up in one of the innumerable grassy vales. He cooked breakfast and ate. While his horse rested, he rolled in his blankets and slept.

In the afternoon, he saddled. Skirting the mountains eastward, he crossed

the trail and kept well above the valley ranches. From descriptions, he recognized the Burkhard Snell River spread. It was late afternoon when he located the town of Harp set back in a gulch of the mountains.

Harp was notorious for its wickedness. When the law visited Harp, it did so in force. Reed Ankin had broken that rule, and he had not been strong enough.

Jerry kept hidden until nightfall, but prowled around until he had the map of the town in his head and knew how to reach each avenue of escape. Soon as it was dark, he rode down back of the town and left his horse behind a shed behind the biggest saloon in the place.

Bar Cross riders would naturally visit Harp. If Jerry ran into one who knew him, the way the cards lay, his life would be worth only the bullets with his name written on them.

He hit the street some distance below the saloon and turned boldly up the splintered walk. There were horses at the hitch-rail but it was too dark to read their brands. The door of the saloon was in the corner. He didn't like that, but it couldn't be helped. He gave a hitch to his belt and shoved in.

Under the dull light of a smoky hanging lamp, a few men were lined at the bar against the far side of the room. They turned and surveyed him with hard appraisal. The watchful way they stood advertised that strangers had better exhibit a clean pedigree, according to Snell River standards.

There was no recognition in the hard, questioning looks. Neither had Jerry ever seen any of these men.

On the ride over he had recalled another detail of Reed Ankin's career. Before he had descended on Snell River, he had cleaned up the notorious Creepers' gang in Toke Desert.

Jerry stared coldly at the men eyeing him and swaggered to the bar. He laid down a coin.

"Rye!" he ordered harshly.

The sallow, cadaverous bartender set up a bottle and glass and waited expectantly.

"This is Harp," he insinuated, when Jerry failed to take the hint.

Jerry carefully set the bottle down, but did not pick up his filled glass. Instead, he shifted so he had his eye on every man in the room.

"I know this is Harp," he said unpleasantly. "That's why I'm here. I'm looking for a man!"

Along the bar figures went taut. Hands strayed near guns. Jerry could read the bleak suspicion that he was a reckless lawman whose bold tongue had numbered his minutes.

"Care to put a name to him?" The question came from a flat-faced man with years of evil etched about his mouth.

"That's right, Flat-Face," agreed the bartender, "let him put a name to him!"

"Reed Ankin! Damn his soul!" Jerry crouched as though he fully expected one of the men at the bar was Reed Ankin and would take up the insult and challenge.

Something like a sigh went up. The tension relaxed.

"Why you want Reed Ankin?" The thin edge was gone from Flat-Face's tone.

"Ever hear of the Creepers' gang?"

"That was a long time ago. You're too young to have had any truck with the Creepers' gang." Flat-Face's suspicions were rising again.

"I ain't too young to have an old man who was in the gang. He rotted in jail where Reed Ankin put him. The last time I seen my old man he made me promise to git Reed Ankin. I heard Ankin was here!"

"Reed Ankin *was* here!" Flat-Face gave a harsh chuckle. "He tried to jail practically all Snell River. Found the job a hair too tough and landed in jail himself. Didn't learn him a thing. He come back a spell ago and tried it again. Happen to hear of Jack Pratt who was picked off over yonder in Stony Valley?"

"I ain't lookin' for Jack Pratt,"

pointed out Jerry. "It's Reed Ankin I want."

"Jack Pratt was Reed Ankin tryin' to slip up on the blind side of us Snell River boys," explained Flat-Face. "He got his!"

"Reed Ankin dead!" Jerry sagged. Everyone could see his bitter disappointment.

"Ankin was attended to by a man who had more at stake than you've got," consoled Flat-Face. "What you figger to do now?"

Jerry shrugged his shoulders. As a matter of fact, he didn't know what he was going to do next.

"I'll tell you what." Flat-Face had been impressed. "There's a future here for a man of your nerve. Kidder," he addressed one of the men at the bar, "run out to the back room and get the boss. Tell him I figger I've got a man to go after that Stony Ford meddler!"

Jerry had a premonition that he had succeeded in putting himself over too well. He knew it for sure when Kidder came out of the back room. With him were Ace Burkhard and Beak Irish!

CHAPTER V

Rustled Cows

JERRY'S gun leaped into his hand. His eyes flashed to the door. No hope of reaching it. His gun swung up and flamed. Down crashed the big hanging lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

Jerry dropped flat on the floor. A storm of lead crashed over him. He leaped to his feet and swept his hand over the bar; sent the bottle of rye bounding toward the door.

"There he goes! Down him!" yelled Beak.

Guns blazed in that direction. Covered by the noise, Jerry vaulted over the bar. He landed on the bartender and chopped down with his gun barrel. The bartender dropped, a yell dying in his throat.

Crouched low, Jerry ran for the back of the room. But the back room might be blocked. The gray of a whitewashed window was in the wall at the end of the bar. He stumbled over a chair.

"What was that?" demanded Flat-Face.

Jerry grabbed the chair in one hand. With one blow, he swept the glass from the window.

"Look! The window!" bellowed Ace. "Down him boys!"

A blast of gunfire rocked the building as Jerry dove headlong into the night. A scorching streak of fire lashed across his thigh. Then he was on his hands and knees on the ground, scrambling to his feet.

He sprinted around the building to the shed, slipped the knot that tied his horse and flung himself into the saddle. More lead sang around him as he spurred into the cover of a timbered gulch he had spotted before dark.

His horse scrambled up the steep head of the gulch to an open bench. Jerry pulled up. Riders were crashing after him. He crossed the bench and spurred into a stand of timber up the slope, angling for the pass.

The men behind him had the advantage of knowing the country. They also knew about where he was. Only a miracle would permit him to escape the net they would throw.

Jerry grinned sourly. He had established that Jack Pratt was Reed Ankin and had been framed by Senator Burkhard. But it looked doubtful if he would live long enough to publish the news.

Loping steadily toward the Castle trail, Jerry had an idea. He pulled his horse from the soft ground to a lava bed just above, where tracks would not show.

Darkness hid him now, but he had to be under cover before the moon rose. He was beginning to fear that he had missed the rocky draw for which he was searching, when he came to it. He reined his horse down the draw and rode to the foot of the mountain.

Twice he had to pull up as pairs of horsemen crossed the draw both above and below him. As soon as he could hear no riders, he rode away from the mountains into the open country.

Buildings loomed before him. He stopped and listened. No sounds but horse noises in the corral. A faint light streaming from the front of the house showed a rectangular patch on the ground. Someone was home. Maybe the cook. The silence hinted that all others were out on the search. For this was Ace Burkhard's Snell River headquarters.

Dismounting well back from the barn, Jerry led his horse to a stackyard he had noticed during the afternoon. He led his mount through the gate of the enclosure.

The way the stacks were arranged, he had no difficulty in finding a spot hidden from all directions. He unsaddled, cooled out his horse and wiped him with wisps of hay. He then led him out for water at the corral trough. Back in the stackyard, he tied the horse to a boulder.

In the barn, he found the granary and brought out a big feed of oats.

"As long as we live we'll be as comfortable as we can," he murmured.

He found a couple of buckets in the granary, filled them with water and placed them within reach of his horse. Then he got the sandwiches he had made for such an emergency, and his canteen of water. He left the stackyard, closing the gate behind him. Entering the stable, he crawled into the loft filled with winter hay.

Jerry didn't burrow out of sight. No one would be coming up at this season. He sat down and waited for the moon to rise. Through cracks in the wall he could see the tip of it already. In a few minutes the country was as bright as day.

He examined his thigh where the bullet had creased him. It was just an angry, seared streak that smarted but was not dangerous.

Looking out the hay opening in the gable end of the barn, toward the mountains, he saw a number of riders strung along the timberline. He smiled as he thought of the shock they were going to get when the net came up empty.

On the east side of the barn was the horse corral filled with spare mounts. At the other end of the barn and some distance away, was the house. Nearly as Jerry could judge he had disturbed no one. Stretching out in the hay, he went to sleep.

BEAK IRISH

It was after midnight when he was awakened by the trampling of horses. Disgusted riders were snaring fresh mounts. Beak Irish was in charge.

"Of all the damned mysterious disappearances," he raved, "this takes the cake! I heard him a couple times down below me, when we was riding the upper trail to close the pass. I know, positively, he didn't get there first. Neither did he ride across the trail and swing around the head of the valley. Wish he had. He'd have run into the bluffs and been a setup for target practice!"

Jerry had thought of trying the head of the valley. He was lucky.

"Got any suggestions, Flat-Face," sneered Beak, "aside from sending word to Ace that you've got a man to down Jerry Curran?"

"Lay off, Beak!" growled Flat-Face. "He put it over on all of us. That hombre is smart and dangerous."

"You think you're tellin' me somethin'?" demanded Beak.

"Where's Ace?" asked Flat-Face.

"He went back to Stony Valley to rout out the boys to cut Curran off in case he gets over the pass. But Curran's around here somewhere, and we've got to find him. We don't even dare start changing them Stony Valley brands till we get that confounded jasper planted."

Jerry wondered what Stony Valley brands Beak meant. This was the first he had heard that Stony Valley was experiencing rustling. Since there was no way to get cows from the south side of Deep Stony River, they must have come from the north side.

"Ace ain't taking any chances on Curran stumbling on them cows we're holding at Deer Flats. If he come over Castle Pass, it's a wonder he didn't bump into 'em. The boys are fetching the drive down here tonight." Beak swung up on a fresh horse. "Come on!" he snapped. "We've got to find that nuisance!"

As soon as the riders were gone, Jerry went back to sleep and slept until the sky began to gray. A big bunch of stock was moving into a meadow some distance below the barn. When the stock settled, the weary riders turned their horses into the corral and went to the house.

As the light grew stronger, Jerry sized up the Stony Valley cows. A fine lot, but too far away for him to read the brand.

Beak Irish and his riders returned to headquarters. Beak was in a vile mood. As they turned their mounts into the corral, he found fault with everything.

"Belou, you and Hastings was guarding the pass back of the rocks on the west side. You prob'ly laid down and had a nap while Curran rode through!" he accused.

"We didn't do no such a thing," denied Belou. "Ace offered a hundred bucks to the man who got him. That's enough to keep me awake!"

"Same here!" agreed Hastings. "And I wouldn't have slept anyways. I've got some regard for my own hide!"

"Belou!" called a voice from the granary. "Where'd you put them feed buckets? They ain't here."

"I ain't had 'em," denied Belou.

"Aw, dry up! Use the coal oil can with the bail on it!" growled Beak. "Let's git a little shuteye. We've got plenty to bother us without worrying over a couple of cussed buckets!"

Jerry's horse chose that moment to let out a teasing *huh-huh*.

Jerry held his breath.

"What was that?" demanded Flat-Face. "Sounded like a horse in the barn." He went to the door and peered into the empty stable. "Nothing there," he said.

"What's wrong with you, anyway?" demanded Beak Irish. "First you open your mouth and spill everything you know to Jerry Curran. Now you're hearin' things nobody else can hear. Go down to the house and get something to eat and a little sleep before you start climbin' trees and hangin' by your tail!"

"Damned if I ain't beginnin' to look over my shoulder, for a fact," admitted Flat-Face, convinced he'd imagined he'd heard a horse where there was no horse. "Last night was enough to give a ghost the willies!"

They all went to the house. In a few minutes, the ones who had brought the stock to the meadow came to the corral. They saddled and rode toward the hills.

Jerry feared his horse would give him away for sure next time. He knew what the horse wanted—more oats and maybe some more water. Might be less dangerous to try to supply him than to risk his teasing *huh-huh* when someone was around.

He slid down to the stable, got a big feed of oats and went to his horse in the stackyard. Once again he filled the water buckets and returned to the loft.

Riders came and went all day, but

nothing happened other than a mounting strain on tempers.

Jerry heard several bits of information. None of it counted outside of learning the location of the guards at the pass. He ate his last sandwich and drank the last of his water just before dark. The moon would be an hour later tonight. Sometime between dark and moonrise, he had to get through Castle Pass.

As soon as it was dark, he slid down to the stable and went to the door. A shadow was slipping quietly along out front. It peered into the stable and then turned to stare at the stackyard.

Jerry recognized him by his shape and a faint light falling on his cast of features. It was Flat-Face. Flat-Face must have connected the disappearance of the feed buckets and the horse he thought he had heard. He had arrived close to the truth. His gun in his hand, he took a step toward the stackyard.

This was no time for ethics. Jerry pulled his own gun. The slight movement drew the attention of the outlaw. He spun around—too late.

Jerry's gun crashed down on his head, toning down what had started as a rousing yell to a gurgle. Jerry caught him as he fell and eased him to the ground. Swiftly he bound him with his own belts and gagged him with his own handkerchief. Then he dragged him to the stackyard and tied him to the boulder.

Throwing his hull on his horse, Jerry led him out of the enclosure and closed the gate. He stepped up and rode leisurely through the soft dark to the mountains.

Tracks made no difference now. He avoided rocky ground and swung over to the trail. The trail would be the last place anyone would expect to find him. Just below the pass, he pulled aside, stepped down and left his horse in a thicket.

Keeping well up on the west side, he worked down over the pass. Slowly he inched along. Somewhere close below him, the guards were stationed. Patiently, he waited and listened. At last he was rewarded.

"Beak swears he heard Curran below when we rode to close the pass." The voice was not twenty feet away. "You ask me, that guy threw in the hooks and beat us here."

"I don't see how he could," argued another voice. "Gawd! I'll be glad when the moon comes up so we can see somethin'!"

The moon was also what Jerry was waiting for. He crouched behind a big boulder, hoping the moon and a searching party wouldn't arrive at the same moment.

At last the moon poked up over the peaks at the east end of the Monuments. Now he could see his men clearly, and Jerry rose half upright.

"Reach!" he said in a low tone. "And stay faced as you are!"

The guards stiffened. Outlined against a boulder, they were helpless. Two pairs of hands went up.

Jerry disarmed them and threw their weapons into the brush. Ten minutes later, he had them both bound and gagged and was after his horse. He mounted and rode swiftly through the pass.

He had gone less than a quarter of a mile when he heard someone coming and pulled aside. Ace, Rek and Buzz were riding up from the valley.

Jerry waited till they were well above him and then rode down the trail until he found a place where he could turn off to the east without leaving tracks. Faint shouts behind him were a warning that the guards had been discovered.

Circling back up the mountain, Jerry took cover in a little gulch not two hundred yards from the pass. There he stepped down and waited while the pursuit fanned out below him.

He was about to ride on when a party of five from the other side of the pass came over to join the hunt. They swung east and passed close to where Jerry was hiding. As soon as they were well ahead, Jerry mounted and followed. It

ought to be safe right behind a searching party.

He rode for two hours, and then had a narrow escape as the party, satisfied he was not in that direction, turned back. Nothing but the bushy top of a windfall hid him as they rode within a few yards of him. When there was nothing around him but the silence of the moonlit mountains, he kept on to the east.

Jerry was still traveling east under the rims of the Castles when day broke. He had gotten around the heads of several canyons—natural routes to the river and certain to be infested with searching parties. He chose a timbered ridge and rode down to the valley. Picking a shallow wash that would attract no attention, but was deep enough to conceal him, he made it safely to the river.

Turning west, he followed a sheltered course to Stony Ford. Shortly after noon, he reached town and crossed the bridge to the south side.

CHAPTER VI

Arrested

WHEN Jerry rode up the street, groups of men were gathered on the sidewalks. He noticed that talking stopped as he passed.

When Jerry was opposite the hotel, Doctor Biglow, black bag in hand, came down the steps. Like the others, he stared at Jerry.

Wondering why he was attracting so much attention, Jerry reined to the hotel and looked down on the rotund little doctor.

"Someone sick in the hotel?" he asked.

"You don't know?" Biglow was short.

"The reason I asked was because I didn't know," said Jerry.

"Sid Mason is in room six. He was picked up in the lumber yard, yesterday. Someone sneaked up behind him and shot a chunk out of his skull. Wonder it didn't blow his brains out!" Biglow eyed Jerry skeptically, and added: "Lot of folks are wondering where you were when the shooting took place!"

"Sid shot! And you practically accuse me of doing it!" Jerry was angry. "The one man I can't afford to lose is Sid Mason!"

The doctor softened a little. He said: "Sid's got better than an even chance."

"I've got to see him, doctor." Jerry stepped down and ran up the steps.

"Sid's still unconscious. Do you no good." Biglow pattered after Jerry.

The young lumberman, his craggy face pale, was stretched in bed. A big white bandage enveloped his head like a turban. Nellie Carver was sitting beside him.

"I'm taking Mrs. Colville's place while she gets a little rest," explained Nellie. Mrs. Colville was Stony Ford's one trained nurse. "It's time for her to be back now."

Jerry went to the window and looked out. One building commanded the window of room six. The bed could not be seen from there. Assured of that, Jerry glanced at the transom. It, too, was out of line with the bed.

"I thought of that, Jerry," said Nellie. "Doctor Biglow and I moved the bed."

"That was smart, Nellie," approved Jerry. "We've got to pull him through."

"Yes, we've got to pull him through." Nellie's soft eyes went to the still figure in the bed and lingered.

Scowling, Biglow followed Jerry into the hall. Jerry grinned at him.

"I haven't been near here for the past three days," he said. "Still, I've got a pretty good idea why Sid was shot, even if I don't know who did it. And believe me when I say Sid mustn't be left alone a minute."

"Very fine words," said the doctor gruffly. "But it's been my experience that a man who'll hide out over one crime isn't above committing another." He went downstairs.

REK ANSEN

Jerry hurried after him to ask what he meant by accusing him of hiding out. But at the foot of the stairs, they met Mrs. Colville. Biglow slipped away while Jerry was talking to the nurse.

While he was standing on the porch trying to see which way the doctor had gone, Nellie came out of the hotel.

"Jerry," she accused, "you never told me that you'd already been trapped in the Oasis when I warned you that night."

"What was the use? Anyway, what you told me started me on the road to cleaning up the mess."

"Is what happened to Sid a part of it?" asked Nellie. "I—I couldn't bear to have anything happen to Sid."

Jerry's lips formed in a soundless whistle. "So that's it!" he said. "The lucky stiff!" Then, "See here, Nellie! What did Doctor Biglow mean when he accused me of hiding out from a crime?"

Once more Jerry and Nellie were so absorbed they were oblivious of what was going on around them. Before Nellie could answer, Jill Hammond rode to the porch. She dismounted and came slowly up the steps.

When Jill and Daddy Bill had passed the Carver place while Jerry and Nellie were leaning over the gate, Jill had had the sensation of being smothered. She had not seen Jerry kiss Nellie, but they were close enough.

She had scarcely heard Daddy Bill running on triumphantly. Memory came to remind her how Nellie had always been on Jerry's side when they were at school. She didn't know how much she had been depending on Jerry until she thought his support had been removed.

Jill was honest enough to admit that there was no reason why Jerry shouldn't turn to Nellie. Jill herself was engaged to Ace. Yet she suffered as though she had been betrayed.

"Jerry Curran is a pretty sly fella," summed up Daddy Bill. "The way he sneaked around and defeated Ace and my road measure proves that. Lookit the way he's been makin' love to Nellie Carver right under everybody's nose. Must be getting pretty thick when we could drive right by and they could go right on kissin' without noticin' us!"

By this time, there was no doubt in Jill's mind but what Daddy Bill had seen Jerry kissing Nellie Carver.

"Mother Sadra, what do you suppose me and Jill saw as we drove into town?" chuckled Daddy Bill as he and Jill entered the living-room of the Hammond home.

"How would I know?" smiled Sadra.

"We saw Jerry Curran leaning over the Carver gate in the dusk, kissin' the daylights out of Nellie Carver! Reckon it warn't as dark as he thought it was!"

Sadra took one look at Jill's stricken face and the laugh that was bubbling up died. She took Jill in her arms.

"Honey," she crooned, "don't tell me you really care what that deceitful scalawag does! Now I guess you see the difference between him and Ace!"

Jill pushed Sadra away. She could stand no more. She turned and ran up the stairs to her room. Bill and Sadra stared at each other in uneasy silence.

"You think that child is in love with a fellow like Jerry, when she can have Ace Burkhard for the taking?" asked Sadra.

"I don't see how she could be that

foolish," said Bill. His troubled gaze went to the stairs.

"Did you actually see Jerry kissing Nellie?" demanded Sadra. She wouldn't have admitted it, but this didn't sound like Jerry.

"Well, they was leaning right across the gate, practically touching faces." Bill's gaze wavered. "I thought they was kissin'." Then, defiantly: "If they warn't kissin', what was they doin'?"

"I think," said Sadra, "maybe we've been mixing in too much, being so anxious to get the best for Jill. No girl wants to be shoved into marriage. After all, Jill is engaged to Ace. It'll work out all right."

"I want her to be happy," said Bill. "And she sure ain't happy now."

Bill and Sadra carefully avoided mention of either Jerry or Ace during the next couple of days. But both were in Jill's mind as she listlessly helped with the ranch work. She was out at the corral with Daddy Bill when Lucky Kelly came riding up the lane. He stopped at the corral and glared down on old Bill.

"Bill," he said with the frankness of men who have lived and suffered together, "you're a dummed old fool! Jerry never shot up the Oasis like they claim! Neither is he hiding out! And you know it!"

Old Bill gasped. He hadn't been off the ranch for the past two days. This was news to him. His neck got red as he realized what Lucky had called him.

"I wouldn't put anything past Jerry Curran, the way he's been actin'!" he snapped.

"Well, lookit the way you and that other coyote acrost the river has been actin'!" yelled Lucky. "It was Bar Cross riders who framed that fight on Jerry in the Oasis! I wouldn't be surprised to find you had a hand in it! I'm warnin' you, Bill, to lay off my boy, or me and you are goin' around and around!" He spun his horse and thundered down the lane before old Bill could stop sputtering long enough to invite him to hop right to it.

"What does he mean, Daddy Bill?" Jill was faint with worry.

"Who knows?" snarled Bill. "The cussed ol' crank is plumb out of his head half the time!"

"I'm going to town and find out," said Jill.

Bill opened his mouth to forbid it, remembered that he and Sadra had decided to lay off, and said nothing.

Jill was nearly to town before it occurred to her how peculiar it was for Lucky Kelly to come and jump on Daddy Bill the way he had. A smile suddenly lightened her face.

"Why, the blessed old fraud!" she said. "It was me he was talking too—not Daddy Bill at all!"

It was at the post-office that Jill heard about Sid Mason. She rode down to the hotel, and there were Jerry Curran and Nellie Carver on the porch.

"I came to see how Sid is getting along," Jill spoke with difficulty.

"He's still unconscious, but he'll pull out of it," said Jerry. Wildly he tried to think of some way to remove that accusing expression on Jill's face.

Sheriff Wherli came up the steps and confronted him.

"Where you been hiding?" he demanded. "I've been looking for you the past two days!"

"I ain't been hiding," denied Jerry. "What you want me for?"

"Oh, just for shooting up the Oasis saloon and attempted murder! That's all!" said Wherli. "Come on! You and I are due to go into conference!"

Jerry followed him down the steps, picked up the reins of his horse and walked down the street with the sheriff.

Back on the porch, Nellie Carver was watching Jill's distressed face as Jerry was led away under arrest.

"Jill," she said, "I've got to explain something to you."

"You don't have to explain about you and Jerry, if that's what you mean." The brightness of tears was in Jill's voice. "Jerry means nothing to me!"

"You and Jerry have always been in love with each other," contradicted Nellie. "I ought to know. I used to be

jealous of you. You've no right to freeze him the way you did just now."

"But—but—" Nellie's frankness left Jill speechless.

"You mean about a few nights ago when you and Bill Hammond rode past my house? I'd just stopped Jerry to tell him something I overheard in the café. I was trying to warn him he was going to be framed in the Oasis."

"Jerry was framed in the Oasis? Then Wherli had no right to arrest him!" Jill was ready to run after the sheriff.

"You ought to know that without telling." A critical note crept into gentle Nellie's tone. "But that isn't what I want to explain. I heard what Bill Hammond said to you when you drove past. It wasn't so."

"And I suppose you met by accident here on the porch today?" Jill's heart was beating furiously, but she tried to maintain an air of mild interest.

"Yes, we did. I was taking Mrs. Colville's place with Sid, when Jerry came up. He had no idea I was there."

"Where has Jerry been?"

"He didn't say."

"Why do you tell me all this, Nellie?" Jill's conscience would not allow her to show interest in Jerry while she was still engaged to marry Ace.

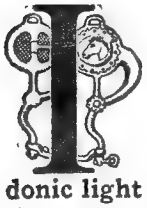
"Do I have to repeat that you and Jerry are in love with each other?"

"Don't be silly!" admonished Jill.

Nellie was smiling over the lilting note in Jill's voice as she watched her ride down the street. She nodded and murmured: "The only one you can kid is yourself."

CHAPTER VII

Out on Bail



IN THE sheriff's office, Ben Wherli booked Jerry.

Jerry took off his gunbelt and laid it on the desk. The sheriff, a sardonic light in his shrewd eyes, watched the young rancher.

"Will you send someone to get hold of Lucky?" requested Jerry. "I've got to get bailed out of here. I've business on hand."

"Such as?"

"Such as trying to find who tried to kill Sid Mason."

"That's my job. I've already got a suspect. Set down." He motioned Jerry to a chair and took one himself.

"It isn't entirely your job," argued Jerry, debating on how much he would have to tell Wherli in exchange for his suspect. "Sid not only is one of my best friends, but he's the one man who can clear me of this Oasis frame-up."

"Frame-up?" Wherli raised his brows. "Of course. They all are. Tell me your version."

Jerry told him a true account as far as he went.

"You didn't say what Sid Mason had to do with it," Wherli pointed out. "And you ain't mentioned why you let me walk past you and Sid five minutes after the battle, and never cheeped."

"Suppose I had complained," asked Jerry, "and Sid and I only had a vague clue as to why I was framed?"

"You'd still got your pants throwed in jail," admitted Wherli. "Is that why you hid out?"

"I told you I wasn't hiding out," repeated Jerry.

"I suppose you didn't know I went out to the Rafter M the morning after the fight," said Wherli. "Probably it's news to you that Lucky come storming into town with me. He wouldn't deny but what he knew where you was, either. And he raised so much hell, I finally give up tryin' to get anything out of him and arranged bail for you just to get rid of him. Of course it's a plumb accident you come riding into town before Lucky's dust has settled."

"Listen, sheriff," said Jerry, "I didn't have any idea you wanted me. I didn't think that gang would have the gall. I ain't seen Lucky or anyone else I'd trust to carry guts to a bear, since right after the battle."

"Then where was you?"

Jerry hesitated. Wherli was square. Then he remembered that Senator Burkhard had sponsored the sheriff.

"I can't tell you—not yet," he said. "But you know that a finer man than Lucky Kelly never lived. He knows where I was and he gave me his blessin'."

"Goes back to the election and maybe Jill Hammond," guessed the sheriff.

"It goes back to the election," admitted Jerry, "but Jill ain't got a thing to do with it—not in the way you're thinking. Now, what about that suspect of yours? Maybe he can throw some light into the dark corners."

"My suspect is getting fuzzed up," growled Wherli. "If it turns out you was framed like you claim, I ain't got a suspect."

Jerry grinned. "Don't tell me, sheriff, that you're like them officers we read about in the papers. Everytime they arrest a man on suspicion, they try to connect him with every unsolved crime in history. The one thing I can't afford is to have Sid die."

"How was I to know that? How did I know that Sid couldn't pin it on you? I don't know it yet, either."

"Someone didn't suggest that to you, did they, Wherli?"

"Huh?" Wherli was startled and then thoughtful. "There're folks around here who don't like you, Jerry," he said. "Long as Lucky's already put up bail, you can go. But when this comes up for trial, you better have a story you can make stick."

Jerry buckled on his gunbelt.

"Wherli," he said, "just as soon as I have something definite, I'll come clean." He went out.

Wherli watched him go.

"Doggone Ace!" he muttered. "Why couldn't he be on the up and up like his father?"

Jerry mounted his jaded horse and rode home. Lucky saw him coming and was down at the corral to greet him.

"I ain't been home long myself," he said, his voice deep with relief.

"So the sheriff bellyached," grinned Jerry delightedly. "Thanks—thanks a million!"

"That thick head not only figgered you'd shot up the Oasis in revenge for that shot taken at you during the parade, but that you'd downed Sid Mason," marveled Lucky.

"Wherli hauled in his horns after I talked to him."

"Ben is sold on Senator Burkhard, but I find he ain't got no particular love for Ace," said Lucky. "Maybe it won't hurt him to open his eyes after a while. How did you make out over in Snell River?"

Jerry related his story.

"You had a close call," commented Lucky grimly. "But I don't get it—about them cows being rustled from the valley. The way I figger, the stock ought to be headed the other way."

"I don't get it either," puzzled Jerry. "There wasn't a hope of my getting a look at the brands. Carp seen anything?"

"I've neglected Carp," said Lucky. "All my time's been taken up trying to beat sense into Wherli—and a few others. Now you're back, I'll ride up and see him."

"You wait till I get a bite to eat and a couple or three hours' sleep and I'll go with you." Without waiting for an answer, Jerry, suddenly conscious of how exhausted he was, started for the house.

SHORTLY after Jerry left Stony Ford for the Rafter M, Ace, Beak Irish, Flat-Face and Buzz rode into the north section of town and entered the Oasis saloon. Pike was at the bar and filled with news. A minute later, the Bar Cross men were in conference in the back room.

"So Jerry got over to Snell River, shot his way out of the Harp saloon, and then hid right in my own stackyard, while you clumsy bunglers stumbled all over him!" sneered Ace.

"Don't forget you took personal charge of the roundup," reminded Beak.

"That ain't the worst part of it," said Ace. "He got home again. How he made it through the net we had is a mystery to me."

"I'll tell you," offered Flat-Face. "That hombre is smart."

"I'd like to know how much he can prove," worried Ace. "If he found out them cows are wearing the Rafter M brand, we're in for rough going."

"That's what comes of carryin' your private rows into the valley," criticized Beak. "I told you how it would be.

WIREGOLD JONES

Your old man knew better. Even after we had Linus Kelly where we wanted him, he gave up tackling Lucky Kelly, bad as he hated him. I've always wondered what he had against Lucky."

"It was over a girl," said Ace.

"I see. Hist'ry repeatin' itself," nodded Beak.

"Nothing of the kind," denied Ace. "And my going after Jerry Curran ain't made the slightest difference. The mistake was made when Ankin was sent to jail instead of the cemetery."

Ace scored there and Beak acknowledged it with: "Anyway, we can't quit now. We've got to plant Jerry Curran or get out of the country."

"How about Lucky?" inquired Flat-Face.

"Now Jerry's got to Lucky and spilled what he knows, Lucky will have to go, too," decided Ace. "And I'd like to know what he said to Wherli. It looked like a good idea to have Jerry arrested to keep him away from Snell River. Only it didn't work out that way."

"I said that hairpin was smart," said Flat-Face. "How you figger to get rid of him and Lucky?"

"Hibberd might attend to it from where he's prospecting," suggested Beak. He paused and frowned. "I'd like to know how Rek come to miss Jerry with his knife. Right on top of that, he bungled with Sid Mason. Looks like he's fell flat since he got Ankin."

"Howcome everyone who's tangled with Jerry Curran has fell down?" inquired Flat-Face. "I don't like it."

"Scared?" prodded Ace.

"Not of anything I can stand and argue with," denied Flat-Face. "And I can't help wondering if Hibberd ain't goin' to find himself out on a limb when Jerry and Lucky find Carp Holden has come up missing."

"They can't pin a thing on Hibberd," said Ace. "Stop croaking!"

"They couldn't pin rustlin' on you, either, but it looks like they had," pointed out Beak.

"No one will believe Jerry, even if he did find out about the brands," Ace snapped. "Before he can prove it, he'll be gone and Linus Kelly will own the Rafter M—till I take it away from him. We'll be settin' jake in the saddle. You boys go back to the Bar Cross. I'm going across the river to see what I can find out.

Ace had faith in the power of the Burkhard name to keep himself in the clear. Once Jerry and Lucky were out of the way, the only thing he had to fear was that Sid Mason might recover and talk. There was no way of knowing what Sid might say. Ace was sure he knew something. Jerry's visit to the Snell River country was proof that Ankin had spilled the beans.

Right after he crossed the bridge, Ace met Wherli coming down the street.

"Any news of our gunman friend?" he inquired.

"If you mean Jerry Curran, Lucky Kelly put up bail and he's gone home," said the sheriff.

"Where was he hiding?"

"Couldn't find out."

"Well, it'll come out at the trial." Ace shrugged. Then he spoke in a lowered tone: "Something funny is going on around here. I'd like to know what it is."

"So would I," said Wherli. "Maybe that'll come out at the trial too. By the way, I was just talking to Jill Hammond. She's on her way home. I s'pose that's where you're headed. You hurry and you can overtake her."

"Thanks." Ace loped his horse up the street. Not so good. The sheriff had gotten rid of him. What had Jerry told him? An old worry rose to plague him. Suppose Jill had really recognized Rek on the roof of the feed store? In some way he had to marry her before she was induced to tell what she knew.

AFTER Jill left the hotel porch, she went to a store and did some shopping. She turned that Oasis frame-up over in her mind, wondering what Nellie knew. It would be enough to free Jerry. Jill started for the court-house.

On the way, she met the sheriff and learned Jerry had already gone home. Relieved, she got her horse and started for the Wagon Wheel. She rode slowly, dreaming over how Jerry was not in love with Nellie. She heard hoofbeats behind her. Some of the brightness went out of the day. Ace was riding to overtake her.

"This is luck, Jill," greeted Ace. "Wherli told me you'd just left town."

"Hello, Ace."

"You don't sound very cordial."

"I'm sorry," apologized Jill. "Wherli doing anything about the crime wave in the valley?"

"He's going to take Jerry over the jumps," said Ace. "It's time someone did. Only for Lucky, he'd be in jail where he belongs!"

"Jerry was framed in the Oasis." Jill spoke with such conviction, that Ace was torn between jealousy and fear that Jill had definite information.

"So you've talked to Jerry and he's made you believe he was framed," he accused.

"I didn't talk to Jerry," denied Jill. "I only saw him on the hotel porch talking to Nellie Carver when I went to see Sid Mason."

"Then Sid has snapped out of it and told what he knows!" Ace did not realize how that sounded.

Jill gave him a searching look.

"Did you think Sid had something to say?" she asked.

Ace controlled himself. "I thought Sid might shed some light on who was doing all this promiscuous shooting," he said.

"And you had an idea he wouldn't name Jerry?" persisted Jill shrewdly.

"Forget it!" Ace made himself sound amused. "Let's forget the troubles of others and air our own. Made up your mind about the wedding date?"

"I told you, Ace, that I never would name the date until it was cleared up who that thin man was who tried to kill Jerry!"

Ace's eyes glittered.

"I don't see what that has to do with you and me," he said. "But if you want it that way, I'll find out for you." At last he realized that he was never going to claim Jill until Jerry was gone.

Ace rode as far as the Hammond gate. He did not mention Jerry nor the wedding again. But when he turned back, he knew there must be no delay in silencing Jerry—if he had to do it himself. What Jill had said informed him that Sid Mason had not recovered and talked. But Jill was moving close to the truth. The first time she talked to Jerry! That must not happen.

JERRY sank into a deep sleep the instant he hit the bed. Dawn of the next morning was graying the sky when he was awakened by Hod Carney, the old choreboy, shaking him.

"Wake up, Jerry! Wake up!" wailed Hod.

"S'matter?" murmured Jerry.

"It's Lucky! Lucky's been murdered!"

Jerry bounded out of bed and gripped Hod with a strength that made the old man wince.

"Lucky murdered! He can't be!"

"I went down to feed the horses, and there he was, dead!" Hod was crying now.

Jerry wasted no time in questions. He pulled on his clothes and followed Hod down to the corral.

Lucky, his face gray and set, was lying on his back just outside the corral gate. Jerry saw that he had been dead for hours. A small trickle of blood had flowed under him and dried. Jerry turned him over. Lucky had been knifed in the back!

Lucky's horse was in the corral, wearing his master's bloodstained saddle. It was instantly obvious that Lucky had not come home by himself. Death had been instantaneous. He had been killed somewhere else and brought home. Also, no effort had been made to conceal the fact.

"If I'd only kept awake and gone with him," Jerry blamed himself. But there was no time to brood. The sheriff had to be notified and Lucky's murderer run down.

"Lucky was going to go up on the range and talk to Carp yesterday afternoon, Hod," he said. "Did you see him go?"

"Yes. He went three-four hours after you got home. But I didn't know where he went. He never said. Far's I knew, he might have went to town. I warn't worried when he didn't come home for supper."

"It ain't your fault, Hod," consoled Jerry. "You couldn't know when he ought to be back. Go get the boys and tell Wingo to ride for the sheriff."

There was nothing Jerry could do but keep the enraged riders from tramping out any evidence that might have been left by the murderer before Wherli had a look. One thing was plain enough. The same man who had thrown the knife at Jerry had killed Lucky.

CHAPTER VIII

The Route

EN WHERLI came to the same conclusions as Jerry—that Lucky had been killed elsewhere and brought home to the corral to serve some obscure purpose of the killer. Jerry thought the sheriff ought to know about the knife thrower who had tried to pick him off, and related the incident.

"Jerry," Wherli growled, "it seems to me there is a lot you've overlooked telling me. Howcome you kept that to yourself?"

"Because Lucky and I were on the trail of something, and we both thought we'd better let it go for the time."

"If you'd told me, maybe Lucky would be alive now. See what holding out on the law does?"

"Where would you have looked for a knife thrower?" asked Jerry.

"Huh? Anyway," Wherli evaded, "no one can accuse you of it. How about that prospector?"

Jerry shook his head. "It wasn't Wiregold Jones who threw the knife at me. Wiregold is short and wide. The knife thrower was tall and thin."

"How about Carp?"

"I've sent a rider after Carp. But you ought to know Carp wouldn't use a knife on anyone."

"We'll see when he gets here. I s'pose Linus Kelly owns the Rafter M now. He'll have to be notified. Know his address?"

In his grief and anger, Jerry had not thought about what would happen to the Rafter M—the spread that was home to him. He had been struck a double blow. Linus Kelly wouldn't have him on the ranch a minute, even if he consented to stay.

"I reckon that's right," he said. "I don't know where Linus is, but Lucky did. Maybe we can find an address in the office."

In a compartment of the desk was a sealed envelope. Written on it in Lucky's big fist was: "To Jerry Curran. In case anything happens to me, deliver this to Sheriff Wherli."

Jerry handed it to the sheriff who tore open the envelope and read the few lines on the single sheet of paper. Disappointment clouded Wherli's face.

"Just the name, address and telephone number of a lawyer down in the capital for me to get in touch with. I thought it might throw some light on the murder." He paused and then added: "Kinda looks like he thought something might happen to him."

"He'd been talking about getting old and his time growing short," admitted Jerry. "I didn't pay much attention. Thought he might be bilious."

The rider Jerry had sent out to get Carp came streaking into the yard.

"Carp ain't there!" he shouted. "Ain't no sign of him anywhere. His horse and saddle is gone, and there's blood in the camp!"

"Maybe, Jerry," said the sheriff, "you don't know as much about Carp as you think you do. We'll ride up and have a look.

There was little doubt but what Lucky had met his death at Carp's camp. But the rocky ground left no tracks and no trails led away from the camp. As Jerry pointed out, it was possible to follow a rocky route all the way from the camp to the gulch back of the corral. And the murderer had had plenty of time.

"Looks like Carp knifed Lucky after all," said Wherli. "If he didn't, why did he make a run for it?"

"There's some other reason for Carp being gone," insisted Jerry.

"Someone knifed Lucky," said Wherli. "Until we find Carp, or you make up your mind to tell what you know, I'm suspectin' Carp."

Jerry regretted that he had not taken a chance on telling Wherli all he knew yesterday. Then he would have had Lucky's backing. Today, he was an outsider, without even a job. Unless he could lay hands on the murderer, he would never make anyone believe Ace Burkhard was at the bottom of the trouble.

Wherli scattered the Rafter M crew over the range to search for signs of the vanished cowboy. At Jerry's suggestion, the two of them rode up to the head of Indian Creek where Wiregold Jones had staked a claim. They had no trouble locating it. The claim was posted with no trespass signs.

"No trespass signs!" grunted the sheriff. "The old boy must be bushed!"

Wiregold was digging in his claim. He dropped his shovel and snatched up his rifle.

"Hey, you! Can't you read?" he demanded.

"We want to talk to you," said Jerry.

"Oh, it's you!" Wiregold dropped the butt of his rifle. "Whatcher want?"

"We're looking for a Rafter M rider who's missing," explained Jerry. "We're wondering if you've seen any riders around in the last day or so."

"I ain't seen nobuddy," said Wiregold. "And I don't want to!"

"Keep your shirt on," advised Jerry. "A murder's been committed. We need Carp Holden for a witness."

"Well, go find him! I ain't askin' nobuddy to help me find gold. I'm Wiregold Jones who knows all there is to be known about gold. I'm goin' to name this mine the Wiregold Jones Mother Lode."

"Come on!" Wherli was disgusted. "He's plumb loco."

Back at headquarters, they got through the dreary business of the coroner's jury. Wherli went to town to communicate with the lawyer in the capital and to organize a search for Carp. Jerry called the Rafter M riders together.

"Boys," he said, "the answer to this lies somewhere around the old land grant. If we're going to find that an-

swer, we've got to move fast. Soon as Linus shows up, I don't need to tell you that we're all through on the Rafter M. We already know I've been marked for killing. I'm going up on the range alone and give the killer a free try."

A roar of protest went up.

"We all want in on this!" insisted Wingo.

"No," said Jerry. "We've got to play out the bait, and I'm the bait. If I'm not back by dark, you come and look for me."

Jerry got his top horse and added his rifle and scabbard to his regular equipment. In the dissatisfied silence of his crew, he rode away, heading for Carp's camp.

He approached the camp warily. No one was about. As he looked the camp over, he noticed things he and Wherli had missed on that first hurried, disappointing visit.

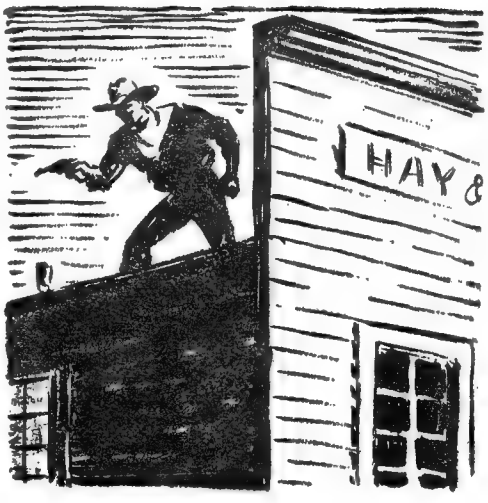
In the thicket where Carp had left his blankets just as he had rolled out of them, he found Carp's spurs. Carp had left the camp on foot. He never would have mounted that hammerhead he rode without his hooks. The horse and saddle being gone counted for nothing.

Studying the firehole and camping sign, Jerry came to the conclusion that Carp had left the camp the night of his own visit. Wherever he had gone, he had never returned.

Lucky being returned to the corral began to make sense to Jerry. If Carp had been disposed of, the murderer was trying to plant the impression that Carp had murdered Lucky, tried to divert suspicion, lost his nerve and fled.

Knowing Carp's aversion to walking, Jerry decided it must have been something very close by that had caught his attention. The land grant was close to the camp. Besides, everything that had happened pointed to the land grant.

Jerry rode down and searched along the south fence. There was no sign of tampering—no breaks in the wire. He returned to the gate. No boot marks in the trail. Yet Carp must have gone to



the land grant. Anywhere else, he would have put on his spurs and ridden.

Beginning at the river, Jerry began riding out the rough draws between the river and the south fence, clear to the mountain bluffs. Nowhere did he find sign that anyone had visited the scab land.

Yet the more he thought about it, the more certain Jerry became that all these disappearances, murders and attempts at murder were connected with the old land grant. As he sat his horse by the gate, it occurred to him that he had been acting inconsistently.

He considered it impossible to rustle cows from the south side of the river. Still, he had just been looking for tracks of rustled cows. There was a way to check up.

Jerry urged his horse up the mountain slope and circled back toward the river and the bluffs that broke steeply down to the rim of the river gorge. Up close to the divide there were great meadows where cattle ranged at this time of year. Just east of where the river had carved a mighty cleft through the divide itself, the bluffs gave away to a gentle, grassy slope for a space, making a fine watering place at the river.

Several bunches of cows were on the slope and strung along the series of meadows under the divide. He rode among them, reading the brands. This

part of the range should have been alive with Rafter M stock. He found only a few head. Impossible as it seemed, he was forced to conclude that the stock he had seen over in the Snell River country had been Rafter M's.

For the first time, the scope of the plan became clear to Jerry. Originally, Lucky was to have been ruined by this sleight-of-hand rustling. Then he would have been swarmed under with cows driven over the proposed new road. The road measure failing, Lucky had been murdered, partly to remove a man who knew too much, and partly so the Rafter M would fall into the hands of Linus Kelly—a man Ace could handle. But how were the cows moved across Deep Stony River?

This line of reasoning, coupled with the fact that the stock must have been worked to pick out the Rafter M's, led Jerry straight to another startling conclusion. Wiregold Jones was neither loco nor a prospector.

Jerry had been expecting some sort of an attack on his life since he'd left headquarters. Until now he had no idea of the nature or from what quarter. If Wiregold was a rustler, he was probably stalking the last man who stood in the way.

The Snell River range had been strange to Jerry, but not this range. He decided on a little test to learn if he were being shadowed.

Where he was in the meadows there was no cover near enough for a bushwhacker who had to make sure of his victim with one shot. The logical thing for him to do would be to get between his victim and the ranch and pick him off when he started home.

Jerry rode along under the peaks as though he were going to check further on the brands. He started through a low pass in a little ridge that separated two meadows. When hidden from all directions, he turned right and rode up a curving gulch, dropped down into another pass and turned back of a low ridge in the meadow he had just left.

He left his horse in concealing boulders. Rifle in hand, he hurried back to the pass and crept to a pile of rocks high enough on the side of the divide so he had a clear view of both meadows.

A rider was in the fringe of trees on the lower side of the meadow he had just left. Apparently, he was so sure Jerry had gone on, he was not using caution. He crossed an open spot. His shape and beard identified him. He was Wiregold Jones and well mounted.

Wiregold went around the lower end of the ridge he supposed Jerry had crossed, but did not come in sight on the other side. He thought Jerry was there and was keeping hidden.

Jerry didn't dare try to leave the meadows until he located Wiregold. It was nearly thirty minutes later that he saw him again.

Wiregold, evidently disturbed over the strange disappearance of his quarry, had turned back. Jerry caught sight of him riding behind a screen of brush at the north end of one meadow. He was riding nervously, searching every inch of the way ahead.

When he reached the slope leading down to the river, he turned down it, following a gulch that would have concealed him from a lower lookout point than the one Jerry occupied. He pulled up at the river's edge, took off his gunbelts and hung them around his neck. Holding his rifle in his hands, he urged his horse into the water.

Wading belly deep, the horse headed downstream. A moment later, horse and rider splashed from sight between the walls of the gorge.

Jerry had the answer as to how the cows were rustled from the south side of the river without leaving a track on the old land grant or tampering with the south line fence. The stock was driven down the river itself.

In the valley, Deep Stony River was a treacherous stream bedded with shifting quicksands In common with everybody else, Jerry had taken it for granted that the river was the same up the canyon.

With no one guarding the supposed-

ly rustler proof range, the herd could be worked at leisure. Cutting out the Rafter M's was slick. With few missing from other spreads, it would look as though Lucky himself had had a hand in the mysterious disappearance.

Jerry wondered if Wiregold were scurrying after help. Even if he was, he would lead Jerry to more necessary revelations. Jerry hurried back to his horse.

Taking his cue from Wiregold that he was going to encounter swimming water, Jerry hung his gunbelt around his neck and carried his rifle in his hands. He urged his horse into the water and followed Wiregold between the jaws of the canyon.

The next second his horse went into deep water and was swimming. He noted that the current was not swift here. The horse had to swim only a few yards and then found footing. He eased around a turn and saw an empty stretch of river.

It was about a mile and a half down to the land grant, Jerry calculated. So far, it would be easy to take cattle down the stream. Since riders must come up stream as well as go down, there could be no really difficult water.

He rounded another bend. For a hundred yards there was a sort of beach between the river and the wall of the cliff on his right. The beach was cut with both the tracks of horses and cows—proof he was on the right scent.

Below the beach was another stretch of swimming water. Then his horse struck footing and walked up an incline that raised him to knee depth in the swift current pouring around another bend. He pulled up. Wiregold was in sight. Even as he saw him, Wiregold's horse dropped into swimming water at the foot of the short rapids. A brief swim and the horse was splashing along in a shallow, sluggish current.

Jerry waited a couple of minutes after Wiregold had vanished around the next bend. It occurred to him that he might not be playing smart. If there was one beach there might be others—perhaps a good camping spot. Wiregold might be heading for a camp in the canyon.

If he blundered into a sizable bunch of men, he would be in a bad spot. Yet it was too late to turn back. Once more he started down the river.

Again Jerry made a turn. The gorge widened and the water was not quite belly deep on his horse. Abruptly, the gorge swung to the south. Jerry made a mental note that he remembered this spot from the contour of the bluffs above. He was about halfway down to the land grant.

His horse stepped past a right-angle corner in the right wall and moved out to where the gorge unexpectedly widened. To his right was another beach with a raised rocky floor back of it which extended deep under a great overhang. The spot showed evidence of having been used as a camp ground.

Four wet horses—one of them Wiregold's—were grouped at the upper end of the beach. A few yards below the horses, Wiregold Jones was in excited consultation with Ace Burkhard and Rek Ansen.

Jerry was prepared to stumble into a rattlers' nest. That was not what shocked him into staring stupidly for a precious second. Seated on a rock at the lower end of the overhang, one sleeve ripped out of her shirt and soaking wet, was Jill Hammond!

CHAPTER IX

Jill Acts

LINUS KELLY, nephew, was neither a native nor a habitant of Stony Valley. Lucky was not proud of him and his shady connections. Few knew him by more than a name—someone who in the vague future would inherit the Rafter M.

The news of Lucky's murder spread

through the valley like prairie fire. It brought speculation on the final disposition of the Rafter M. Jill was worried over how the change of ownership would affect Jerry. She assured herself that Linus Kelly, whoever and wherever he was, would be certain to keep the man who knew all of Lucky's affairs and how Lucky had made the Rafter M pay a steady profit.

Because there was logic enough behind it to give it substance, Jill did not realize this was wishful thinking. Although she was sure Bill and Sadra would never consent to her marrying Jerry, even if she refused to marry Ace, the thought that Jerry was near helped her bear it. She refused to consider that he might lose his job and be compelled to leave the valley to find another in keeping with his experience and ability.

Jill wondered if Daddy Bill knew anything about Linus Kelly. Probably Mother Sadra would know as much, but Jill shrank from asking her. If she broke the existing truce by mentioning Jerry, Sadra might seize the opportunity to turn on the pressure to make her marry Ace.

So Jill went out to the corral to look for Daddy Bill. Then she remembered that he had ridden up on the mountain range to inspect the grass and had not returned.

It was mid-afternoon before she waylaid Bill as he put his horse in the corral.

"Daddy Bill," she asked, "do you know anything about Linus Kelly, the man who's going to inherit the Rafter M?"

"Lucky talked to me about him once." Satisfaction spread over Bill's face. "According to Lucky, Linus ain't goin' to be much of an addition to the valley. Still, there's one thing in his favor. Ace says Linus knows what kind of a man Lucky had for a foreman. Jerry Curran will get his walking papers. Maybe tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow!" echoed Jill. "Why, when Luke Bagon stopped in to tell us about Lucky, he said that Wherli didn't have any idea where to look for Linus Kelly."

"Ace knows where he is," said Bill. "You can bet Ace has got in touch with him before now."

"How did Ace know where to locate him?" demanded Jill.

"I dunno. Just happened that way, I s'pose," shrugged Bill. "Seemed to know him pretty well—the way he talked. He said Linus was a progressive young fella." He paused and chuckled. "We'll get that right of way through the land grant when Linus moves to the Rafter M. Maybe that'll learn Jerry Curran a thing or two before he leaves the valley to hunt him a job!" He was so pleased over the prospect, he failed to notice how the news affected Jill.

"Mother Sadra's keeping dinner hot for you, Daddy Bill," she managed to say. "You better run along and eat."

"I'm hungry for a fact," admitted the old man and went to the house.

Jill clung to the corral gate for support. Jerry was going to lose his job. Perhaps he would be leaving the valley tomorrow. She wondered if Jerry knew what was going to happen to him, or would it burst like a bomb?

Jerry had to be warned. And there was something else. She had treated Jerry badly, added to the deep hurt of his loss of Lucky Kelly. Jerry might leave the valley and never know how she regretted the mistake she had made.

Jill glanced toward the house. Her gun was in her room. She didn't dare chance going after it for fear of getting headed off by Sadra. Yet she didn't want to go to a ranch where so much violence had been taking place, unarmed. She went to the bunkhouse and knocked. No one was there. She slipped inside and looked around. Lee Crandal's extra gun and belt were hanging at the head of his bunk.

Five minutes later Jill, the big belt with one wrap around her slender waist to take up the slack, was wearing the heavy gun instead of her light thirty-

eight. She saddled and went up the trail to the pool. Riding to the highway, she loped steadily up the valley toward the Rafter M.

Jill was so intent on seeing Jerry, it did not occur to her that it was a little unusual for a girl to ride to a womanless ranch to visit a man with whom more than half the valley suspected she was in love. When she arrived, she was surprised to see the whole outfit, horses saddled, doing nothing—just waiting.

Lucky had been taken down to the undertaking parlors in Stony Ford, so the outfit was not laying off out of respect to him. Besides, they all knew Lucky would rather they went ahead as usual.

Jill rode to the corral where she saw Hod slowly replacing a broken pole in the corral fence. He looked up curiously as Jill drew rein beside him.

"I want to see Jerry Curran," she said.

"He ain't here just now," hesitated Hod.

Jill's tone was pinched as she asked: "You mean he's left the Rafter M?"

"No. He ain't exactly left." Hod began to sweat.

"Then where is he?" Panic gripped her. "Has anything happened to him?"

"Not that I know of," evaded Hod.

Jill breathed again.

"Then where is he?"

"I dunno if he wants anyone to know or not." Hod was not a quick thinker. Besides, Jill's loveliness and distress were having their effect on him. "Well, he don't agree with the sheriff that Carp killed Lucky and skedaddled. He's gone up on the range to look around."

"Alone!" Jill turned accusing eyes toward the waiting riders.

"He wouldn't let anyone go with him," said Hod. "Reckon he figgered a lot of riders bargin' around would spoil his chances."

"You mean Jerry's gone alone to see if the killer won't try to murder him?" Jill got it instantly. "And you're all moping around the house while Jerry might be being killed!"

"It ain't that way a-tall!" defended Hod. "Jerry runs this place. But us boys have agreed to wait only just so long. Anyway, we figger Jerry is right."

"Just where did Jerry go?" asked Jill.

"He thinks that old land grant has something to do with all these killings and disappearances. He went there—first off, anyway."

Jill nodded.

"Looks as though I'd have to see him some other time. You tell him I was here," she requested. If Hod knew what she contemplated, she was sure he and the other boys would see to it she did not interfere with Jerry's plans. She swung her horse about and rode down the lane at a sedate pace.

At the gate she glanced back. A grove of trees hid the headquarters. She turned up the trail leading to the land grant and lifted her horse to a dead run.

Jill followed the trail directly to the gate in the south fence of the land grant. The ground was rocky, but she deciphered enough sign to make out that someone had ridden out the fence and then had gone in the gate. It must have been Jerry. She followed him into the land grant, failing to see the marks where he had come out after his search had proved futile.

Raised on the range, Jill was no novice at tracking nor how systematically to comb a country. The grant was not large, but it would take time to ride it out. Still, it was the thing to do and she did it.

Then, as Jerry had done, she left the grant and rode as far as the ford. Here she began riding out the draws and gulches that headed against the mountain bluffs. Perhaps, if Jerry hadn't stopped to check up on Wiregold, they might have met.

At the head of the first draw south of the river, she stepped down and climbed the low ridge that separated her from the stream. It never paid to overlook anything.

The calm of the hot, windless afternoon was broken only by the murmur of the water as it poured out of the cleft in the buffs in a shallow, rapid riffle.

As she reached the top of the ridge which was fringed with a thin, broken line of scrubby brush, she ducked back. Just below her, in a rugged side gulch in the ridge, two horsemen were riding down to the water.

One of the men, tall and thin, with close-set eyes, was Rek Ansen, one of the Bar Cross riders who reminded her of the man she had seen on the roof of the feed store. The other was Ace Burkhard!

What business did this pair have on Rafter M property? She hugged the rocks closer. Were they the reason Jerry had come to the land grant all alone?

The pair rode down into the water. It seemed a foolish act. Deep Stony River was dangerous. There might be quicksand here. They should have ridden down to the ford to cross. She began to edge back to make a dash for her horse. She stopped, amazed. The pair had turned down the stream.

"Ansen, if we can find that meddler and close his mouth, we'll be playing in luck at last—and about time." Ace's voice floated up to her clearly. "But I don't understand his coming here alone. And he sure is alone. When he left the grant, not a soul was in sight but him."

"That's what I told you," growled Ansen. "If you'd let me crack down on him, like I wanted, we'd have this all finished now. But no, we had to ride clear down to the lower end of the grant and gawp across the river to make sure."

"We can't afford to take chances," snapped Ace. "With Pratt, Carp and Lucky dead, and Sid probably dying, how would it have looked to a couple of witnesses if you had shot Jerry and been seen?"

"Not so good," admitted Ansen. "Don't make no difference. He's up on the mountain alone. Whatcher think he went for?"

"Since Wherli never mentioned rustled cows, I've got a hunch Jerry has just tumbled that them cows he saw when he was over in the Snell River country were Rafter M's. He's probably gone to check up," said Ace.

Ansen laughed harshly. He said: "Wonder if he's got any idea Hibberd will be layin' for him? Hibberd ought to get him easy!"

"I doubt it." Ace was skeptical. "Hibberd ain't keen on tackling Jerry alone. We'll go up to the meeting place and wait. Hibberd will know where to find us if he needs a hand. The three of us will be enough to fix his clock before he has time to spill—" They got past Jill and the rush of water drowned out the rest of Ace's words.

Hearing from Ace's own lips that he was implicated in the crimes taking place in Stony Valley did not shock Jill. She had grown so suspicious of him that what she had just heard seemed like a logical conclusion. And Jerry had been over in the Snell River country hunting rustled cows. Ace had known it when he'd accused Jerry of hiding out to escape arrest on a charge framed by Ace himself.

Jill started to back off the ridge. She had to find Jerry. But she had no idea where to look for him. And where were Ace and Ansen going? They rode between the walls of the cleft, down the riffle in the river, and disappeared.

Jill didn't know what to do. Ace and Ansen were going to meet the man they called Hibberd. Then they would gang up on Jerry. Only one course occurred to her. If Ace and Ansen could ride down the river, so could she.

She ran to her horse, rode over the ridge and down into the water. As Ace and Ansen had done, she penetrated between the walls of the gorge.

Nosing carefully around a bend, she saw nothing but the smooth walls and a dark, sluggish stream. Her horse dropped into swimming water. Fifty yards, breasting a mild current, and her

mount once more found footing. Her holster and gun were filled with water. She emptied the holster and blew the water out of the weapon. There was no time to dry them.

She kept searching for a hidden break where Ace and Ansen could leave the canyon and gain the south range. But the walls merely grew higher and higher. Jill remembered the watering place under the divide. Perhaps that was the other end of the trail.

Around the next bend of the river she came to a narrow strip of beach between the water and wall. It was a couple of hundred yards long. She was glad to get out of the river even for that short distance. In the sand were the damp tracks of the two horses ahead of her. And, strangely, the beach was cut with cattle tracks.

Harrassed by a lifelong impression that the river was paved with quicksand, Jill had been fearful of every step her horse took. The cattle tracks relieved her mind. Then their significance burst on her. She had stumbled on the rustler trail—the trail for which Jerry had been searching and had evidently missed.

She was aware that her discovery had increased the danger of her position, but she had to go on. She followed the twisting canyon around bend after bend. Twice her horse was in swimming water. The way seemed endless. Her caution increased, though every instinct urged her to hurry.

In the middle of a bend, her horse dropped into deep water. Powerfully, he swam forward, robbing her of a chance to observe her usual caution. Around the curve they surged. And there, under an overhanging cliff which covered quite an extensive area above water, were Ace and Ansen.

The pair had dismounted and were seated on a couple of boulders. This must be the meeting place with Hibberd.

Her horse, seeing the other horses and a dry place to land, lunged on and scrambled ashore. Before she could make an attempt to turn back, Ace raced forward. His face bleak with rage and amazement, he seized her reins.

"Jill! What are you doing here?" His voice shook with the violence of his emotion. "Spying on me! That's what you're doing! It was a trick after all! Jerry planted you to spy on me!" His outburst ended on a note of bitter accusation.

"Jerry didn't plant me!" The fear Jill had experienced when he had grasped her reins turned to anger and loathing. "What are you doing that anyone would want to spy on you?"

"If Jerry didn't plant you, how did you get here? Who else knows you're here?" The expression in Ace's icy eyes frightened Jill. It warned her not to admit that no one knew where she was.

"You tell me why you're here," she countered. "Is there any reason why I can't ride down the river as well as you?"

Ansen snorted.

"Kinda got you there, Ace," he chuckled.

"Shut up!" snarled Ace. Then to Jill: "Get down from your horse!"

Jill was tempted to balk, but saw that Ace was going to drag her to the ground. As she stepped down, Ace jerked the heavy gun from the wet holster. He gazed at the unfamiliar weapon savagely.

"Oh, no! Jerry didn't plant you!" he said. "He even give you a gun! Set down on that rock!" He pointed to a boulder a few yards down the beach from where Ansen was seated.

There was no use resisting. Jill went to the rock and sat down. One thing lifted her spirits. They couldn't do anything to Jerry now. She felt better as she watched Ace lead her horse up the beach to where the others were standing with trailing reins.

"I s'pose this means another disappearance," speculated Ansen, his greenish eyes on Ace.

Ace didn't answer. The back of Jill's neck crawled. His silence was more

ominous than if he had said "yes!" He walked up in front of her.

"Now," he said, "tell me how you found this trail and what you mean by spying on me!"

"I'll tell you nothing!" she defied him.

"Oh, yes you will!" His hand shot out and fastened on her sleeve. His brutal yank tore the sleeve from her shirt at the shoulder. Jill tumbled from the rock to the ground. Ace grabbed her arm and lifted her to her feet.

"Let go!" Jill struggled furiously.

"You'll really get hurt, Jill, unless you talk!" Ace's grip tightened painfully.

"She won't talk, Ace!" said Ansen. "Everyone knows she's in love with Jerry! Squeal on him? No! The question is, how do we do it? Gun, knife, or water?"

"I'll let you know when the time comes!" said Ace coldly.

Ansen got to his feet and took a few steps to his right so he could see Jill. Ace was cutting off his view.

Jill's eyes went wide. Ansen had a slight hitch in his right leg. She had not remembered until now, but the man she had seen running on the feed store roof had a hitch in his gait. She knew she was looking at Pratt's murderer.

"Don't like the looks of me, girlie, eh?" Flame flared in Ansen's close-set eyes. "Why fool around, Ace?" He pushed back one side of his open shirt. Jill saw the handle of a heavy knife. That was how Lucky Kelly had died! How she would die!

Ace saw the horror on Jill's face and spun around.

"I told you, Ansen, I'd let you know!"

Under the compelling command of Ace's eyes, Ansen let his hand drop and started back to his seat.

Splashing around the turn above, coming down the stream, Jill saw another horseman—a bearded man with a rifle in his hands and twin gunbelts hung around his neck. Jill recognized him as the prospector she had seen in Stony Ford the day of the election. Ace greeted him as Hibberd.

Ace let go of Jill's arm and went up the beach. Ansen stopped and turned to watch Jill—something like a cat watching a mouse he knows cannot escape.

Hibberd left his horse with the others. He and Ace came back to where Ansen stood. With sinking heart, Jill noted the satisfied expression on Ace's face. Hibberd must have brought good news. That meant bad news for Jerry.

CHAPTER X

Battle

HIBBERD'S eyes kept going to Jill.

"What's the girl doing here?" he demanded.

"That's what we were about to find out when you showed up, Hibberd," said Ace. "She followed us in."

"Maybe I can tell you about that," offered Hibberd, pulling at his beard. "I was up on the ridge wondering if it warn't gettin' kinda hot for me to stick around on the head of Indian Crik. And I was trying to figger how to move out without anybuddy gettin' suspicious, when I seen Jerry Curran ride up from the ranch and go prowling around the old land grant."

"We saw him, too," said Ace. "But we wasn't sure he was alone until it was too late to do us any good."

"That jasper gives me the creeps," complained Hibberd. "For a while I thought he'd figgered how we was gettin' cows off the southside range. When he come out the gate and headed up the mountain, I knew he'd missed it. But he's getting close. He went to checking brands up in the meadows."

"We doped that out," nodded Ace. "But about Jill. Where did she get in on this?"

"About the time Jerry reached the meadows, she come to the land grant on

a high lope. I watched long enough to make sure she was alone and hunting Jerry Curran, then I tried to pick me a spot where I could get a shot at that meddler."

"You sure Jill was alone?" asked Ace.

"All alone."

"Then what we waitin' for?" demanded Ansen.

Jill's heart stood still, and she watched Ace hopefully. But he avoided her eyes.

"Why didn't you stay and get Jerry instead of running down here?" demanded Ace.

Jill had already given Jerry up for lost. Her relief was so great over learning that Hibberd hadn't finished the job, she almost forgot her own peril.

"You'll see the point in a minute," said Hibberd. "While he was in the meadows, there was no cover close enough so I could risk a shot. And when he made up his mind that the cows he'd seen were Rafter M stock, he was so suspicious, he got cagy. Like I figgered, he started to visit my claim. Only he didn't go. He plumb vanished in them little hills between the two big meadows."

"Watching to see if he was followed," divined Ansen.

Hibberd chuckled. "He still is. I know pretty near where he's holed up."

"If you knew where he was, why didn't you move in and finish the job?" demanded Ace.

"Not me!" refused Hibberd flatly. "That jasper plays in too much luck! Three of us ain't too many. We hurry right back and we'll have him dead to rights."

"Let's get moving then." Ace took a step toward the horses.

"Wait!" Ansen rose to his feet. "Was you figgerin' to leave the girl here to run out and spread the news?"

The three of them turned and looked at Jill.

Jill stared back hopelessly. If she took to the water, they'd have her in no time. Might as well stay and face it. And Jerry! They'd get Jerry too! Then, around the turn, holding his rifle high and with his gunbelt hung around his neck, rode Jerry Curran.

As Jerry stared at the astonishing scene, the three men facing Jill spun around. Fortunately, they were even more taken by surprise than Jerry. It gave Jerry time to leap from his horse. For this close work, he flung his rifle aside and grabbed his sixgun.

Ace, Ansen and the man Jerry knew as Wiregold Jones were going for their weapons as Jerry fired.

Wiregold, half covering the others, was the victim. The lead caught him in the temple. His knees buckled and he pitched over on his face. His half raised gun skidded along the beach just beyond his outflung fingers.

Jerry leaped ashore. The guns of Ace and Ansen blazed. The lead whined through the spot where he had been standing and splattered the canyon wall.

Jill flung herself behind the boulder that had served her as a seat.

Again Jerry's weapon roared.

Ansen croaked a curse. The gun dropped from his fingers. His right shoulder was shattered. The shock of the blow drove him to the ground. Momentarily, he lay paralyzed.

Ace fired again. A track of fire streaked across Jerry's cheek. But Ace, who had been covered by the other two, was now in the open. He lunged aside as Jerry triggered his gun.

Ace's furious lead sang harmlessly past Jerry as Jerry missed another shot.

Ace bounded to the boulder where Jill had taken cover. Jill read his intention to use her as a shield. She scrambled to her feet, dodged and darted up the beach.

Ansen, still stretched on the ground, had recovered enough to throw out his hand and catch Jill by the ankle. He brought her down, heavily. Clamping one leg over her to hold her fast, he let go of her ankle and reached for his knife.

Jill, saddle hardened and strong,

struggled furiously. She clenched her fist, lashed at his wounded shoulder. Ansen cursed and tried to reach her with his knife. He was still so weak and dizzy from shock, the thrust fell short.

Jerry centered Ace and pulled the trigger again. His gun only clicked. Desperately, he charged down the beach in an attempt to reach Ace before Ace could cut him down.

At the click of the empty gun, Ace laughed in triumph. Deliberately, he aimed at Jerry and pulled the trigger.

A numbing blow struck Jerry in the side. He held his feet and rushed on. Ace tried to fire again. Now it was his gun that was empty. As Jerry closed with him, Ace swung at his head with the weapon. Jerry ducked and grappled. Locked together, they staggered around the beach.

It was like the old school days when they had fought each other straining chest to chest. Only this time, life was at stake, and Jerry was handicapped by a bad wound.

Ace, his big arms wound around Jerry, tried to use his superior weight and strength to crush the lighter man to the ground. Jerry bowed his back and shot in punishing fists. He caught Ace in the pit of the stomach, driving the breath out of him. The embrace of the big arms slackened. Jerry shot a heavy punch to Ace's jaw.

A few yards down the beach, Jill and Ansen were also locked in a life and death struggle. Ansen's wound, robbing him of his agility and strength and one hand, made an even fight of it. Jill, both her hands locked around his wrist, hung on grimly.

But Ansen was a strong man. The first shock of his shattered shoulder was wearing off. He gained strength. Slowly, he forced the point of the knife toward Jill's throat.

"Help me, Jerry!" pleaded Jill.

Jerry, weakened by loss of blood, was wavering. Black spots danced before his eyes. Jill's call cleared his head. Savagely, he battered at Ace. Ace staggered back, carrying Jerry with him. He tripped over Hibberd. They sprawled on the ground, the fall jarring them apart.

Jerry caught a glimpse of the gun Hibberd had dropped. He made a dive for it. Ace reached it first. Jerry grabbed it. Over and over they rolled in a desperate struggle for the weapon.

A howled curse came from Ansen. Through swimming vision, Jerry saw that Jill had seized the killer's wrist in her teeth.

The gun in Ace's hand roared. There was nothing but a shower of sand for effect. Jerry was weakening rapidly. He tried to flog himself to greater efforts. Jill was depending on him.

They rolled almost on top of Jill and Ansen. The gun Ansen had let fall when Jerry's bullet broke his shoulder, came under Jerry's hand. He closed his fingers on it. Blindly he shoved the muzzle against Ace's chest and pulled the trigger. There was a muffled explosion.

Ace collapsed so suddenly Jerry pitched on his face. He lay gasping, waves of blackness threatening to engulf him. He made a mighty effort and rose to his knees.

Where was Jill? She was struggling with someone. He lunged to feet that seemed to belong to somebody else. It was only a few steps to Jill and Ansen. He didn't dare trust himself to shoot. He reeled toward them, gun raised as a club.

Ansen's bitter voice cried out. With the strength of fear and desperation, he tore his hand from Jill's grip. He was too late. Jerry brought his gun down on Ansen's head with all the power of his waning strength.

He stood staring stupidly on Ansen, still and lifeless. Jill had him by the arm. He knew it was Jill, although he couldn't see her clearly. His head swam giddily.

"That's what I call teamwork, Jill," he muttered a light-headed joke. His knees buckled and he slipped to the ground. From a great distance he heard

Jill pleading with him. Water splashed on him.

Waves of darkness and waves of gray light succeeded each other. He only wanted to rest. But someone, too much of an effort to remember who, was urging him to stay awake.

The sheer persistance of it exasperated him to a point where he tried to get to his feet to move to a quieter place. He was leaning heavily on some slight figure that swayed but did not fall under his weight.

He balked when he was urged to mount his horse. At last he gave in. It seemed that was the only way he could get any peace.

There was an interminable struggle. He made the right moves, but he was so tired. Someone lifted and shoved. It made him angry. He could mount his own horse without help. All he needed was to be let alone so he could rest a minute and get his breath.

The motion of the horse annoyed him. He tried to shift his position. Seemed as though he was tied to the saddle. Who had done that to him?

Cool water rose around him. His horse was swimming. This horse always did swim low, he remembered. The water revived him. Dimly he saw the walls of a canyon—what canyon he neither knew nor cared.

There was a long, painful journey. The dim clatter of excited voices came to him. He was lifted from his horse. Darkness claimed him.

CHAPTER XI

Home

JERRY'S next sensation was that he had just returned from a long journey to some distant land. His spirit had the feel of being caged in an inert shell. It was an effort to open his eyes.

Hazily, he concluded he was in his own room. Figures were moving quietly about. One looked like Jill. Of course he was dreaming. That accounted for the lack of substance to everything.

Jill's voice came excitedly: "Look! he's awake!" Dreams were certainly peculiar.

"Hello!" he experimented.

"You're better!" it was a glad cry. "I thought you were never, never coming out of it. You lost so much blood before I could get Doctor Biglow."

"Doctor Biglow?" puzzled Jerry. Then his attention was distracted by Sadra Hammond bustling in.

Jill turned to her in triumph: "Didn't I tell you, Mother Sadra?"

Jerry's bewildered eyes roving around his room fell on his belt and gun. It brought back what had happened with a rush. He made an effort and sat up in bed.

"How did I get here?" he demanded.

"Jill brought you home half dead." Sadra gently forced him back. "You must lie still," she commanded. "Give the tissues a chance to heal where the doctor took the bullet out of you."

"So Jill brought me out of the canyon?" Jerry's eyes were on the girl while he half recalled the confusion of that trip.

"You could still help yourself a little, or I never would've got you on your horse," said Jill. "Now I must go downstairs and get Doctor Biglow and Mr. Wherli. They're waiting for you to come back to life." She hurried from the room.

Sadra seized the opportunity.

"Jerry," she said, "Daddy Bill and me are terribly sorry for the things we done to you, and the things we said. But who would've supposed the son of such a fine man as Senator Burkhard could be such a villian?"

"Ace! Where is he?" Jerry's voice was harsh and he tried to rise again.

"Don't you remember, Jerry? You fought him in the canyon. Ace is dead. So is that prospector who called himself Wiregold Jones, and that man Ansen who murdered Pratt and poor Lucky Kelly."

"I remember the fight, but my own light went out before I found how the battle ended. And Lucky—when will he be buried?"

"Lucky was buried day before yesterday. You've been hovering on the borderland for three days. But you haven't said you'd forgive me and Daddy Bill. Poor Daddy Bill is all broken up about that road measure, now he finds you were right all the time."

But Jerry wasn't paying attention. He was watching the door. Jill had said she would be right back. Something must be keeping her. He dropped back and relaxed when she came in the door followed by Doctor Biglow and Sheriff Ben Wherli.

The doctor laid a professional hand on his wrist, tested the heat of his forehead and looked at his eyes.

"I don't believe it!" he gave his opinion. "No man can be that tough. You ought to be dead, and here you're about ready to get up." He turned to the sheriff. "You can talk to him a few minutes," he said.

Wherli stroked his lips and chin to conceal a pleased grin.

"I reckon," he said, "the time has come that you can mention the things you said you'd tell, when I last saw you."

Jerry thought it over. He said: "Not till you send everybody out of the room."

"Out you go." Wherli waved his hands in dismissal.

Reluctantly, the doctor, Jill and Sadra left.

"Let's have it," invited Wherli.

Jerry began with the election and missed nothing, even repeating what Lucky had said. That brought back the memory of Sid Mason.

"How is Sid?" he asked.

"Sid is all right. He snapped out of it the day you had your fight in the canyon. What he told me didn't make sense till you just said that Jack Pratt was really Reed Ankin, and the shot that got him wasn't meant for you. Jill added a little to it, too. She told me she saw the man who shot Pratt and recognized him up in the canyon. It was Ansen. Jill hadn't mentioned it before because she feared Ace was involved and she was still engaged to Ace."

"Where is Sid now?" asked Jerry.

"Still in bed with Nellie Carver taking care of him. Looks like a wedding there."

"Keno," said Jerry.

"What I'd like to know," observed the sheriff, "is why you didn't tell me the minute you suspected Pratt was Ankin."

"Would you've believed me, and that Senator Burkhard was a kingpin rustler?"

"No. I wouldn't have," admitted Wherli. "It don't seem possible even now. But half the Bar Cross outfit's in jail and they've talked plenty. Already some of the Rafter M boys are over in the Snell River country bringing back the stock Ace rustled."

"So the rats squeaked when caught! Did you find out what happened to Carp?"

"Yes. Of course Wiregold Jones knew that Carp was camped in a spot dangerous for the rustlers. He was spying on Carp when you visited the camp, and saw you go into the land grant. Unknown to you, Carp followed to protect your back. Wiregold followed Carp. When you didn't come back—seemed to have vanished—Wiregold jumped to the conclusion that Ankin had known about the trail up the river and had told you, and you was following it out. So he bushwhacked Carp and went up the mountain to lay for you at the other end of the trail. Later, he buried Carp in one of the canyon beaches. Wiregold didn't find out where you'd gone until you got home."

"So that was why Sid was shot the day after I left—to keep him from passing on the news about the trail. Wiregold do that, too?"

"No. It was Rek Ansen," said Wherli. "Rek warn't exactly the official killer of the gang, but he liked to kill

and the others were willing to let him run the risks. Being a top gunhand, no one suspected him of being a knife artist. It made him doubly dangerous. He was careful to use his knife only when there was no danger of the finger pointing at him. That's why he used a gun on Sid."

The doctor came in and looked at Jerry.

"A few minutes more and you'll have to go," he told Wherli, and went out.

"How about my bail?" Jerry got in a dig. "Now that Linus Kelly owns the Rafter M, he'll withdraw the bond Lucky put up. He hates me like poison. It's a wonder he let me stay here long enough to regain consciousness."

Wherli looked at him searchingly.

"You mean you don't know?" he asked at last.

"Know what?" Jerry was puzzled.

"Right after election, Lucky went down to the capital. You told me yourself."

"I know that," said Jerry. "I don't know why he went. Just said he had some disagreeable business to attend too."

"That business was to make his will. The envelope you gave me the day Lucky was murdered, contained the address of the lawyer Lucky employed. Get ready for a shock, Jerry. Lucky left his nephew, Linus Kelly, a nice bunch of cash and securities. He stated his reasons. Linus had been mixed up with a bad gang. The proof was clipped to the will. Lucky said in plain English that only a sense of duty induced him to leave Linus more than the necessary dollar. The Rafter M—lock, stock and barrel—was left to you, Jerry. You are now owner of the Rafter M brand."

Jerry couldn't speak for a minute.

"Lucky did that for me?" he asked.

"The old man looked on you as a son, Jerry. It's all in the will. You can read it. It's quite a document. That's all I've got to say, Jerry, outside of remarking that you know mighty well there'll be no trial over that Oasis business. Pat Marvel nearly burned the shoes off his feet getting to tell me it was a frame-up before someone else beat him to it. Now I'll get out."

Jerry was tired, but he forgot it when he looked up and saw Jill entering the room. She closed the door and came to the bed.

"Doctor Biglow saved a little of your strength for me," she said.

"Come here, Jill. Right up close," said Jerry. He reached out a shaking hand. Jill clasped it in her steady, cool ones. She heeded his weak pull and dropped to her knees beside the bed. There was no need for words—not just then. Their lips met in a long salute to the future.

At last Jill broke away.

"Maybe I'd better tell you that I love you and always have," Jerry offered belatedly.

"I've always loved you, too," was Jill's simple confession.

Again their lips met.

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DEPT. 575-H CHICAGO, ILL.

Johnny Skins a Hawg

By S. Omar Barker

Johnny was afraid he'd fall in love with old Elbow Smith's gal-daughter if he stayed on at the ES, and Linda was scared he wouldn't.

"FORTY and fodder is what I'm payin'," says ol' Elbow Smith. "But if you're one of them saddle-stuck sons that shies at a pitchfork, you might as well ride on."

"All the hay I ever pitched wouldn't stuff a snowbird!" This young stranger who give his name as Johnny Highstone shrugged somethin' broad that must of been shoulders under his sun-faded shirt. "But at fifty a month I'd learn mighty fast."

"Thirty-five!" barks Elbow Smith. "Any fence work you do, I furnish the post-holes. All you gotta do is git the dirt out of 'em."

"Make it forty-five," says Johnny Highstone, battin' his eyes, "and I'll also suck eggs."

"Thirty," grunts Elbow. "You know how to skin a hawg?"

"What color?" inquires this appearable young puncher, solemn as a preacher on payday.

At that ol' Elbow begins to kinder grin and crinkles start to come at the corners of his eyes.

"Cowboy," he says, "you shore 'nuff want this job?"

"You don't think I'm settin' here in the hot sun just to watch an ol' gallynipper like you scratch his elbow, do you?"

"Hmn. You don't happen to sing tenor, do you?"

"I don't happen to sing nothin'," says Johnny. "Whenever I warble I do it a-purpose. At forty a month, I'll—"

"We done got one tenor singer," interrupts ol' Elbow, "and he's six too many. Tell you what, I'll meet you halfway: thirty-seven and a half, even money, and no hawgs to skin."

Johnny Highstone was one of these fellers with a face that reached all the way from his cow-lick to his chin, and a pair of the bluest gray eyes you ever seen. Just lookin' at him you couldn't tell whether that sober look come from the natural set of his features or an achin' heart. As he sets there, one long knee hooked around the saddle horn, rollin' himself a little round whiffer, there's a mighty thoughtful, faraway look in his eyes.

"What's half of thirty-seven and a half?" he inquires as he lights a smoke.

"Twice what a cowboy's worth," snorts ol' Elbow Smith. Thirty-six divides easier—take it or leave it!"

"Hell, a minute ago you offered me forty!"

"Gimme a minute more," snaps Elbow Smith, "at the rate beef prices are slippin' and I'll be down to twenty. Fact is, thirty-fi—"

"Mister," Johnny heads him off in a hurry, "At thirty-six you've hired you a cowhand!"

"Until he proves he ain't worth but twenty," chuckles ol' Elbow. "Go put up your pony, Fiddle-Face, while I see if Lindy can rustle you some chuck—if she ain't out galivantin'."

But Linda Smith wasn't out galivantin'. Just then she come strollin' out in a flower-speckled apurn, lookin' as dainty and demure and sweet as one of them little blue flowers I never did know the name of but gosh ain't they purty.

If Johnny Highstone's was the bluest gray eyes that ever straddled a good-lookin' nose, Linda Smith's was the bluest blue ones; and both of 'em must of noticed it, the way her and Johnny kept right on lookin' at each other right from the very first glance.

"Hello," she smiles in a voice that reminds you of the gentle way you sometimes hear crick water gurglin' over a mossy rock. Not forward nor bold, just friendly. "We've already had dinner, but I can set something out for you. Won't you come in?"

" 'Course he's comin' in," butts in her pa. "You don't think I'd expect a man to skin hawgs on an empty stummick, do you?"

Johnny took himself a wash at the hoss trough, combed his wheat straw hair with his imagination for a mirror, then come on in and set down to the snack Linda laid out for him. He could hear the Old Man blowin' hard and cussin' every once in a while in the next room, and after she'd poured some coffee, Linda Smith come and set down opposite Johnny at the table.

"Don't mind Pop," she says, "he's trying to balance his books for the end of the month, and he isn't very quick at figures."

"Yes ma'am, I noticed that," says Johnny Highstone.

"Mom always goes over to visit Mrs. Wallace on the day he works on his books. More coffee?"

"Thank you, ma'am," says Johnny, and after that he's a perfect sample of "a sober man with solemn phiz, who eats his grub and minds his biz." Except that he can't keep his eyes on the chuck. If the gal had of minded it, I reckon she could of gone on in the kitchen. When he gets through she does, and Johnny goes in where the Old Man is.

"Mister Smith," he says, "I wish you'd walk down to the stables with me a minute."

Ol' Elbow snorted some, but he went.

"What's this?" he complains. "If you figger to unboozem yourself about bein' an escaped train-robber or somethin', jest fergit it. I ain't a man to—"

"No," busts in Johnny quietly, "I just wanted to tell you I've changed my mind. I ain't takin' the job. And don't ask me why or I'm li'ble to tell you."

"Hunh? Listen here, you young yampus, if you're tryin' to get me up on your wages—"

"It ain't the wages," said Johnny as he throwed on his saddle. "It's your daughter. She's—"

"She ain't no suchova!" Ol' Elbow Smith picks up an ol' neck-yoke that's leaning against the shed. "One caloomnious word about my gal-daughter, Fiddle-Face, and I'll bend this here neck-yoke acrost your—"

"She's the kind of a girl," goes on Johnny Highstone quietly, swingin' up to the saddle, "that a man might fall in love with. Me, I'm pullin' out!"

"Hell, that ain't nothin' to fight your head about!" grins ol' Elbow. "I've already got four cowhands in that fix. You'd jest make it five. And besides—"

But already this young stranger had done took out, nor he didn't even look back when ol' Elbow yelled and throwed the neck-yoke at him. Ol' Elbow stomped back up to the house scratchin' his head. Besides sure 'nuff needin' another cowhand, this was the first time he'd ever seen a bee buzz right on apast a honey pot without being shoo-ed, and it sorter foozled him.

"Lindy," he complained, "ever since you reefed your pigtails I've put up with my punchers pickin' posies, not to mention Tom Tanner turnin' into a tenor singer, an' now your ravishin' beauty spooks off a mighty likely-lookin' hand because he's skeered he'll fall in love with you. Sometimes I wisht you'd git a wart on your nose!"

"Nonsense," says Miss Linda, with right smart spirit. "It's your doggone dickering over wages that drove him off. Which way did he ride?"

"West, but—"

"Then you could take a short cut through the Juniper Gap, head him off at Seepy Spring and hire him yet—if you wanted to!"

"And if you wanted me to bad enough," ol' Elbow throws her a wink, "you might go along with me!"

As Elbow Smith and his daughter topped the ridge at Juniper Gap they heard a shot. Then purty soon another one. They seemed to come from down towards Seepy Spring. Any cowboy's liable to take a shot at a coyote, so they didn't think nothin' of it. But down towards Seepy Spring they met Johnny Highstone's roan carryin' double. Johnny was ridin' behind the saddle. The cowboy in it was settin' purty wobbly. Even holdin' onto the horn with both hands, it looked like he'd fall off any minute if it wasn't for Johnny's long right arm around his middle to steady him. There was blood on his chaps, and his face was the color of a premature pancake.

"Why, it's Tom Tanner!" Linda gave a little gasp as she slipped off her horse and run to him. "He's been shot."

"Yes, ma'am," says Johnny Highstone. "I come onto him thrashin' around tryin' to git his leg from under a thousand pounds of wounded horse. He'd bled right smart, but still looked like he might be worth savin' for the hide. Where's the nearest doctor around here?"

"Doc Lambert, postmaster at Fillaree," says Elbow. "He's a hoss doctor mainly, but I reckon he won't be too proud to tend a tenor singer."

All this time Miss Linda has been flitterin' around Tom Tanner like a duck hen around her fav-rite quackling, holdin' his hand and tryin' to comfort him any way she can. Tom hasn't said nothing himself, but there's a look in his lamps that indicates he considers it worth a bullet hole through the leg to have this gal givin' him such attention. But as Johnny Highstone starts straddlin' ol' Elbow's pony to take out after a doctor, he comes to life all of a sudden.

"Elbow," he whinnies, "you goin' to

let this drygulcher git away on a stall like that?"

"Hunh? Drygulcher? You mean—"

"He's got a crazy idea I'm the guy that shot him," offers Johnny Highstone with a shrug.

"Lemme smell your gun," grunts ol' Elbow, and Johnny holds it out.

"It smells of fresh-burnt powder, Highstone," says Elbow soberly.

"Sure." Johnny shrugs again. "I must of neglected to clean it after puttin' this tenor singer's horse out of his misery. Listen, you want me to go git this doctor or don't you?"

Without waiting for an answer he put the hooks to Elbow's horse and took out.

"He didn't shoot you, Tom," says the gal, her voice gentle but positive.

"Somebody did," growls Tom Tanner. "And it hadn't been half an hour since I had a run-in with him. Me and Roop come onto him in the Vega Verde droppin' his loop on an Elbow S horse. Claimed he'd noticed it limpin' from a loose shoe, which he aimed to yank off, and we kinder had it round and round when I called him a horse thief. We'd of brought him in, but he got the drop on us, give us the ha-ha and rode on. Me and Roop separated to circle and keep an eye on him till he got off Elbow S range—and—well, he must of laid for me over by Seepy Springs and plugged me. Then come to my rescue to make it look like he never done it. And now under pretense of fetchin' me a doctor, you've let him git away!"

"He'll be back," says Linda, stubbornly.

"He better," grunts ol' Elbow. "With this here tenor singer laid up, I'm goin' to need him for a cowhand. What become of Roop that he didn't show up again? You reckon somebody shot him too, Tom?"

"How the hell do I know?" growls Tom Tanner with a look that indicates he wouldn't be too sorrow-struck if they had.

"Probly pickin' posies," grunts ol' Elbow.

"It's Tom that brings me flowers, Pop," Linda corrects him. "You feel able to ride again now, Tom?"

So with Linda Smith ridin' behind his saddle, her strong right arm holdin' him from falling off, they took this leg-shot tenor singer on in to the ranch and put him to bed.

RINGIN' Doc Lambert with him, Johnny Highstone did come back all right. He set on Tom Tanner to hold him down while the Doc swabbed out the bullet hole and bandaged it up. Then he started to pull out, but ol' Elbow sent his daughter after him to stop him—or else maybe she went of her own accord. She caught up with him on the porch.

"Johnny," she says, putting a hand on his arm, "you didn't shoot Tom Tanner. Why are you running away?"

For a jiffy he stands there lookin' at the risin' moon makin' purties out of the hilltops, then he turns all of a sudden.

"This is why," he says, and he puts his long arms around her and kisses her. Just once, then starts to go, and purty much of a hurry. But as he starts down off the porch, there's the bulky figure of Roop Hawkins comin' up. Roop gives kinder of a nasty laugh and steps out of his way.

"You better ride fast and far, stranger," he says. "If Tom Tanner kicks off we'll be after you with a rope!"

For just a jiffy Johnny Highstone's hand hovers towards his gun as he stands there eye level with Roop though his feet are on the next step below. Then he shrugs.

"Kinder talkin' outa turn, ain't you, cowboy?" he inquiries and goes longleggin' it down toward the sheds.

The gal comes to the edge of the porch, watchin' him go, but she don't say nothin'. She don't even seem to notice Roop Hawkins till one of his brawny hands grabs her wrist.

"Too bad I never knowed how free you was with them kisses, baby," he says huskily, "or I wouldn't of been wastin' my time thinkin' you was a lady. Well, I ain't goin' to waste no more!"

Linda Smith wasn't one of these heifers that hollers easy, but she was took by surprise. It was the scared little squawk she let out as she tried to push Roop Hawkins away that brought Johnny Highstone back at a high lope. The yank he give ol' Roop's shirt collar would of uprooted a mesquite. They had done swapped a couple of wallops and was squared off to sure 'nuff tangle when ol' Elbow Smith hisself comes rampsin' outa the house and bulges in between 'em.

"Wup, here!" he says. "I don't stand for no ruckusin' amongst my cowhands!"

"Just happens I ain't one of your cowhands, mister," drawls Johnny Highstone.

"Don't fool yourself," grunts ol' Elbow. "I'm needin' one plenty bad, and you're it."

"Maybe you forget what I told you about—"

"Snake fur!" Ol' Elbow snorts a dry one. "You rather work for me or lay in jail waitin' trial for shootin' a tenor singer? The sheriff's a friend of mine."

"What wages?"

"How do I know how much they pay him?" growls ol' Elbow.

"'Bout two thousand and graft, I figger," offers Doc Lambert, who has just stepped out the door. "Gimme half of that and dang if I wouldn't order me a widder, right outa the catylogue. You take—"

"How—how's the patient?" busts in Miss Linda, mainly to head ol' Doc off before his tongue gits too limber like it's in the habit of doin'.

"Tanner? Oh, he'll do to set by, ma'am. Give him a month or so of your nursin', and he'll stand right up to the preacher with you—that is if the spavin don't set in."

He waggles his chin whiskers in a way corresponding to a wink and pats her on the shoulder.

"If I was jest about twenty-eight and a half years younger myownself," he starts off again, "I wouldn't be botherin' with them rich widders in the catylogues. I'd jest—ss-ffft."

The "ss-fft" is the noise he makes when ol' Elbow claps a hand over his mouth.

"Lindy," he snorts, "git a saddle blanket to stuff in Doc's mouth till we git through talkin' business!" He turns to Johnny again. "On second thoughts, Fiddle-Face," he says, "if I hired you, I'd have to hire somebody else to keep you and Roop from ruckusin', and if I sent you to jail they'd waste a week of my time as a witness. So if you hanker to drift, there ain't nobody settin' on your shirt-tail, I reckon."

But Johnny Highstone shook his head.

"Jail or job," he says, "I don't give a hoot which—but there's a suspicion of shootin' a man from ambush hangin' over my head, mister, and I ain't quittin' this country till it's cleared up. If I can earn some wages at the same time—"

"Forty and fodder, then," snaps ol' Elbow. "And the first sign of any more ruckusin' between you and Roop, I'll bend a rifle barrel around the necks of both of you!"

"What caliber?" grins Johnny Highstone, headin' for the bunkhouse.

"That feller will bear watchin', Elbow," says Roop Hawkins when he's gone.

"Maybe so," grins ol' Elbow, "but while you're watchin' him, Roop, don't forgit for a minute to keep one eye on yourself."

"As I was sayin'," opens up Doc Lambert, "I jest got in a new batch of them matrimony catylogues, Roop. Any time you want to order you a wife, jest drop in and look 'em over. Nice thing about it, they don't git a good look at you till they've done stuck their heads through the fence too fur to back out. Now you take—"

"Aw, go to hell!" growls Roop and heads for the bunkhouse.

"Lindy, my love," grins ol' Elbow, giving his gal-daughter a little squeeze as Doc Lambert rides off in the moonlight, "I finally got him hired for you, didn't I?"

"I wonder," sighs Linda, "why he seems so terribly concerned about the wages?"

"Maybe," ol' Elbow gives her another squeeze as they go inside, "maybe he's savin' up to git married."

WHEN Mrs. Smith come home the next morning from her overnight visit with the Wallaces, she found the breakfast dishes still dirty and her good-lookin' daughter settin' alongside the bed of a purt near delirious cowboy.

"It seems to be hurting him pretty bad," whispers Linda. "He's quieter when I sit here and hold his hand."

Mrs. Elbow Smith was a right understandin' woman. She helt her questions for later and gentled her hand on Tom Tanner's brow.

"Feverish," she says. "I'll go make him some sage tea."

As she tiptoed out she left the door open and all of a sudden Linda could hear voices from ol' Elbow's office:

"Nossir, Fiddle-Face," ol' Elbow was sayin'. "Wages in advance is like spittin' against the wind. What the hell you want it for, anyways?"

"Take a guess," says the voice of Johnny Highstone. "Maybe I owe somebody for skinnin' a hawg."

"What color?" inquiries ol' Elbow, and Linda hears him chuckle. "You sure twenty-five's all you goin' to need now?"

Evidently Johnny and her pop are hittin' it off like old cronies, spite of the way they sass each other. Evidently Johnny's also drawin' a twenty-five-dollar advance on his wages, without even havin' to say what for, and it somehow makes Linda kinder mad at herself to realize how curious she is about it.

It don't soothe her none, either, when ol' Elbow comes back in after while, gives her a wink and says the new cowhand wants her to come out and give him her idees about where to set the gate posts for the new corral.

"I'm busy," she says. "If he wants to talk to me, tell him to come in here."

Ol' Elbow gives her another wink and goes back out.

"Reckon I'll have to decide about them gate posts myownself," he reports back to Johnny Highstone. "She's busy—holdin' ol' Tom's hand."

Johnny gives the post-hole digger a thrust like he aimed to dig plumb through to China.

"This Tanner," he inquiries, "I kinder admire his spunk. Purty good feller, ain't he?"

"He'll do to skin hawgs." Ol' Elbow shrugs. "But he does sing tenor."

"Does he like whiskey?"

"Who don't?" snorts ol' Elbow. "But he ain't no guzzler like Roop, if that's what you mean. Say, what's it to you, anyhow?"

"Why, nothin', I reckon," shrugs Johnny Highstone. "Who you figger shot him?"

"Maybe some feller he'd accused of bein' a hoss thief," says Elbow, battin' his eyes. "Or maybe he shot himself—accidental, of course—and ashamed to admit it."

"I smelt his gun. It hadn't been fired. How deep you want to set these posts?"

"Plumb to the bottom of the holes," says Elbow. "Wup—yonder comes Doc and he's fetchin' a saw. If I was goin' to cut a man's leg off, I'd rather use an ax."

While Doc Lambert was dressing Tom Tanner's wound this time, Linda Smith come out to where Johnny Highstone was workin' up a sweat with the ol' dirt lifters.

"Pop said you wanted my advice where to set the gate posts," she says.

Johnny looks up at her kinder surprised. He don't recollect having give ol' Elbow any such message.

"Why—why, yes ma'am," he stammers.

"All right. Set them in the ground!" she says and starts back to the house, but Johnny Highstone overtakes her.

"Do me a favor, Miss Linda," he says. "Forget about what happened last night."

"Oh, you mean about Roop?"

"You know what I mean," he says. "Please—just forget it."

"Why, Johnny?"

Good thing it was broad daylight, for by moonlight it prob'ly would have happened again, from the way they looked at each other. But when he didn't answer her question, the gal's pride begun to kinder bow up like a cat's back. She throwed up her chin and give a laugh without no more sure 'nuff tickle in it than a couple of chunks of ice clankin' together in an iron bucket.

"Don't you suppose I've ever been kissed before?" she coolly inquiries. "Quit being silly and get back to work!"

Evidently Doc Lambert didn't use his saw on Tom Tanner's leg after all. Linda was waitin' on the porch steps when he come back out after while wavin' the saw in one hand and his tongue in the other, so to speak.

"How is he today, Doc?"

"Kinder out of his head when I went in," bellers ol' Doc so loud Johnny Highstone couldn't help hearing it. "But he kinder come to when I showed him this saw. 'God-sakes, Doc,' he says, 'you ain't goin' to cut my leg off?'

" 'Why not?' I says. 'You got two of 'em, ain't you?'

'Hel, Doc,' she says, 'a one-legged man can't ask a gal like Linda to marry him.' Well, sir you ort to seen him when I told him what with my doctorin' and your nursin' we'd git him outa there so he wouldn't even limp at the weddin'—barrin' a little spavin', maybe. Ain't nothin' like a little romance to help a man git well quick, Miss Linda. Why, just readin' about them widders in the matrimony catylogues does my rheumatiz more good than ary bottle of liniment I ever drunk. Trouble is—" he pauses to draw breath and pull his whiskers—"after I send 'em my picture they don't write me no more. If I was jest twenty-eight and a half years younger—"

He goes on out to his horse, still talkin'. But Linda Smith ain't listenin'. She's thinkin' about what Doc said about romance helpin' a man git well. As she goes in the house she sees Johnny Highstone head off Doc Lambert and take him over to the bunkhouse.

A few minutes later, from where she's standing by Tom Tanner's bed, she sees them come out of the bunkhouse again. Doc Lambert is tucking an envelope in one pocket and some money in another. His remarks comes drifting in through the open window plumb plain:

"Five bucks fer whiskey and twenty for the money order to go in this here letter. Glad to 'tend to it for you, young feller. Any time you git lonesome, drop in and I'll interduce you to some of the widders in them catylogues. None of 'em as purty as Lindy Smith, but then they ain't done spoke fer like she is, neither.

THANKS either to Linda's nursin' or to the natural fact that a cowboy is hard to kill, Tom Tanner's hurt leg improved mighty steady. Maybe the whisky Doc Lambert brought helped some, too. A coupla daily toddies of expensive rye done purt near as much to perk Tom Tanner up as Linda's holdin' his hand. But after ol' Doc let it slip that the likker was a present from Johnny Highstone, he wouldn't touch another drop of it.

"Tryin' to square himself for shootin' me, huh? Wait till I git on my feet again—I'll take care of that jasper.

"Tom," says Linda, "promise me something—promise me you won't start any trouble with Johnny Highstone."

"Don't you worry about me, honey." He gives her hand a squeeze. "Any

time Tom Tanner can't hold his own in a gunfight, man to man, you'll hear about it."

As for the bad blood between Johnny and Roop Hawkins, ol' Elbow tended to that by sendin' Roop off to a line camp to keep 'em apart till they'd kinder cooled off. Slim Tedder and Milt Reynolds, his other two punchers, was camped with cattle on the summer range up in the hills. They took turns ridin' in Sunday evenings to set on the porch and spark Miss Linda, but Milt Reynolds admitted to Johnny Highstone one night when he come back to the bunkhouse that they wasn't makin' much headway.

"Looks like the only chance a feller's got," he says, "is to git hisself shot in the leg."

That's sure the way it looked all right.

One mornin' Johnny Highstone took one look at Miss Linda wheelin' Tom Tanner out onto the porch in a wheel chair, another 'un at the blisters in his hands, and throwed down his corral buildin' weapons.

"Boss," he jumps ol' Elbow, "I took this job for the puprose of clearin' myself of the suspicion of shootin' Tom Tanner. But I sure ain't goin' to dig the guilty party outa no post-hole."

"What's the matter—ain't you fallin' in love with my daughter as fast as you figgered?"

"Let's call it pants trouble," says Johnny. "Mine need the dust polished out of 'em—on a saddle."

"All right, then, Fiddle-Face. Stick a hoss between your legs, git over to the west line camp, tell Roop I said he was to join Slim and Mitch in the mountains and you take over the boar's nest."

"Supposin' Roop don't take my word for it?"

"Then try persuadin' him," grunts ol' Elbow. "Gentle, of course."

"Gentle," agrees Johnny and goes to saddle up.

He's ridin' off when he happens to look back and there's Miss Linda standin' on the porch, watchin' him go. So he waves to her, and there's something about the way she waves back at him that he just can't hardly stand. But he rides on.

Roop welcomes him at the line cabin like a bulldog welcomin' a strange second cousin.

"You, hunh?" he says. "Huntin' trouble?"

"I ain't dodgin' it," says Johnny.

Put to him that way, Roop shrugs, packs his warbag and gits out.

For a coupla months Johnny Highstone holds down the boar's nest, rides line and don't see nobody. Twice during that time he's shot at. Both times it's just at dusk of a rainy evening and by the next morning the night's rain has washed out all tracks.

When he rides in to the ranch to draw his pay, he don't make no mention of what's happened. He don't see Miss Linda nowheres around, nor Tom Tanner neither.

"Tom ain't well enough to ride much alone," volunteers Mrs. Smith, "so Linda rides with him right smart. Today, though, they've gone to town in the buckboard to bring out a few supplies."

Quick as he draws his pay, Johnny heads for town, too. He's in the post-office, listenin' to Doc Lambert exercise his tongue with one hand and makin' out a money order application with the other when Linda comes in lookin' purtier'n ever.

"Hello, stranger," she says, putting out her hand.

"Long time no see!" Johnny spreads his left hand over the money order application and takes hers with his right. Instead of shakin' it he just holds onto it, and the look in them blue-gray eyes of his is like a hungry kid lookin' at candy through a window.

"Johnny's orderin' him a wife outa one of my catylogues," ol' Doc Lambert busts the silence with a wink. "How about you and Tom and him makin' it a double—"

The door bangs open and in stalks Tom Tanner, still kinder pale and limpin' a little. There's a gun on his hip.

"I been lookin' for you, Highstone," he says.

For just a tenth second the gray of Johnny Highstone's eyes turns steel blue.

"I killed a man that was lookin' for me once, Tanner," he says. "And the jury turned me free."

Then he shoves his money order application and some bills through the wicket to ol' Doc, turning his back on Tom Tanner like he didn't even exist. Tanner reaches out to whirl him back around, but Miss Linda grabs his arm and hangs fast.

"We'd better go now, Tom," she says, mighty quiet.

Johnny Highstone don't even look around as she pilots Tanner out the door. Doc Lambert's tongue might be hung on a swivet but nobody ever stepped on it. He don't make no mention of what's just took place.

"Yessir, Mr. Highstone," he beams. "There y'are. Your remittance will git there safe, same as the others."

The Elbow S buckboard was still in town when Johnny rode out, and purty soon Miss Linda come slippin' back into the post-office by herself all quiet and purposeful.

"Doc," she kinder stammers, "these money orders Johnny sends—"

"Yessum, half his wages, reg'lar."

"Does he send them to a—a woman?"

"As postmaster, Miss Lindy, I cain't give out no information, but if I could, I'd say that I figger if he was sendin' 'em to a man he'd address the letters 'Mr.' instid of "Miss' or 'Mrs.'—as the case may be, and it ain't his mother. Y'know, Miss Lindy, if I was jest about twenty - eight and a half years younger—"

"Thanks, Doc," busts in the gal and hurries out.

All the way home in the buckboard she don't have anything to say. When Tom Tanner tries to hold her hand she lets him, but her eyes keep watchin' westward where a recent rider's dust is dwindlin' out against the hills and she looks thoughtful-like.

BOUT ten days later Tom Tanner finally r'ared back and demanded her to set the wedding day.

"I — I like you, Tom," she says, very quiet, "but—"

"But what, honey?"

"But I won't marry a man who's—who's determined to kill or be killed in a gunfight."

"You mean Highstone?"

The gal nods. "He didn't shoot you, Tom."

"Like hell he didn't! But listen, honey, if that's the way you feel about it—well, I sure don't aim to let no argument with a fiddle-faced saddle bum stand between me and our weddin'. From now on out, far as I'm concerned, there ain't no Johnny Highstone! Just you set the date and—"

"After the roundup, Tom—I'll—I'll make up my mind—and tell you."

She pats his hand, but when he tries to grab it, she runs into the house.

Next morning ol' Elbow claims his rheumatics are hurting him, so Linda volunteers to ride over to the west line camp and tell Johnny Highstone to drift in Friday morning to help work the roundup. He's already sent Tom Tanner up to help Roop, Slim and Mitch gather and bring down the mountain herd. After Linda is gone, ol' Elbow's rheumatics seems to leave him, for he saddles and rides foothill range hisownself.

Johnny ain't home when Linda gets to the line camp. She starts to make a fire to boil her some coffee when she notices amongst the black ash of fresh burnt paper in the stove, a little strip of white with writin' on it.

"Dear Sweetheart," it reads, in a man's handwrite. "I just want to tell you—"

The rest is burnt up. On a shelf she spies some letters addressed to Mr. John Highstone. The postmark is Toyah, Texas, and the handwrite is femaleish and prissy. But Linda Smith ain't the kind to be peekin' into other folks's

correspondence. Besides, she tells herself, she don't give a darn. It's mighty plain what Johnny's been doin' with half his wages: sendin' 'em to his sweetheart to save for him like many another cowboy.

Linda don't wait for him to get back. Imitatin' ol' Elbow's handwrite, she leaves a note: "Fiddle-Face: Be at the ranch Friday morning. We're going to skin some hogs.—Elbow Smith."

IT WAS close to dusk Thursday evenin' when Johnny Highstone come joggin' towards the Elbow S on the road from Fillaree. He'd come by town to git his mail: one letter from Toyah, Texas, which ol' Doc Lambert had been purt near too excited to give him. This time next week, Doc allowed, he'd be a married man. Johnny was kinder stirred up inside, hisownself, after he read his letter, but somehow couldn't seem to git much satisfaction out of it.

As he rounded the turn of Elbow Draw and come in sight of the ranch house, he suddenly come alive. From up at the house come shouts, shots, the crash of busted glass, a woman's scream of terror and gosh knows what all. Johnny's spurs put his tired horse up the hill like a shot at coyote. As he come closer Ma Smith come bustin' out the front door, yellin' for help. She saw Johnny and practically flew off the porch to meet him.

"It's Roop!" she sobs. "Got hold of that whiskey you brought for Tom. He's crazy drunk! Got Linda tied up—goin' to kidnap her—make her marry him. Shot at me when I tried to stop him. Oh, Johnny, he—"

Johnny don't wait to hear no more. Yonder up from the sheds runs another man. It's Tom Tanner, limpin' some but makin' time. Due to Johnny havin' to stop to yank open a gate, Tanner gits there ahead of him, and just reaches the porch steps, gun in hand, when the front door bangs open and out bulges Roop Hawkins. He's got a gun in his right hand, but that ain't all. With his left he's shovin' the gal ahead of him. She struggles some, but with her hands tied behind her she ain't got no choice, for drunk as he is in the head, Roop's bull-like muscles ain't lost their power.

At the foot of the steps Tanner raises his gun, then lowers it. Johnny can see that he's afraid to shoot for fear of hittin' the gal.

"Roop!" Tanner yells. "Why, you crazy damn—"

Ol' Roop is swearing in a steady stream, his voice a low, mean beller like that of an ol' bull talkin' fight.

"Blank-blank you, Tanner! Beat me outa my gal, huh? This time, you blankety-blank, it won't be your leg. It'll be your blank-blank—"

The roar of his gun drowns out his beller, but Tom Tanner don't fall. Instead he ducks under the porch while Roop suddenly lets go of the gal and stands there starin' at the bloody mess that used to be his thick right hand. For it ain't Johnny Highstone's nature to be just an onlooker at such a business. Instead of foolishly faunchin' straight into it, he has spurred to the west end of the porch where the outreach of Roop's gunhand will be sideways to him, and let him have it just in time to send Roop's bullet wild and save Tom Tanner's life.

But Roop is too full of the wrath of Dutch courage to let it go at that. He grabs up his gun with his left hand and opens fire on Johnny Highstone. Johnny's horse gives a grunty squall and goes down with him. Roop runs to the end of the porch for a finish shot. He aims his sixgun pointblank down at Johnny where he's strugglin' to free hisself from his dead horse.

"Hold it, Roop!" Johnny's voice sounds mighty quiet after all the uproar. Sober, Roop might have heeded. Drunk, he don't. With the results that Johnny Highstone's bullet gets there first. With a grunt Roop drops, rolls off the end of the porch and lays there right still.

Johnny was standin' there lookin' like he sure hated it when Linda Smith

come to the end of the porch, her face whiter'n a snowberry.

"Oh, Johnny!" she sobs. And the next thing Johnny Highstone knows he's up there on the porch with his arms around her and her face is up against his like it didn't never want to be no place else.

Tom Tanner stands there starin' at 'em.

"Damn you, Highstone," he says. "First you shoot me in the leg, then you save my life, and now you take my girl. I be damned if—"

"Wrong three times, Tanner," says Johnny Highstone. "Roop Hawkins done that dry-gulchin'—it was a chance to get rid of you as a rival and lay the blame on a stranger, I reckon. I knowed it from the time he talked outa turn about you bein' shot before anybody'd had a chance to tell him. But I was waitin' for better proof. As for savin' your life—like as not Roop would of missed you anyhow—drunk as he was. And as for takin' your girl—"

All this time Johnny's been untyin' Linda's hands, and now all of a sudden she draws away. She starts to say something but don't git it said on account of the sudden arrival of ol' Elbow Smith and Slim Tedder from one direction and ol' Doc Lambert from another.

"What's this? What's this?" snorts ol' Elbow.

"Looks like somebody's been tryin' to skin a hawg," offers Johnny, but Ma Smith tells her husband what's happened.

"Linda," says Johnny, "maybe it's kinder public, but I don't give a damn if it is: Will you marry me?"

Linda's chin goes up.

"What," she inquires purty acid, "about the 'Dear Sweetheart' you've been writing and sending your wages to?"

Johnny looks puzzled.

"The only 'Dear Sweetheart' letters I ever wrote," he grins kinder sheepish, "I burned 'em up out at the line camp because I didn't figger I had the right to send 'em to you as long as all I had to offer to live on was half a cowboy's wages. But now—here, read this letter."

> Dear John (the letter says):
> You need not send any more money, for I am going to get married soon. That is, if he turns out as nice as his letters. Hoping to see you soon anyway, I hereby release you from your promise.
> Your friend,
> Geraldine Welkhammer
> Toyah, Texas

Linda looks up with a puzzled frown.

"But, Johnny, I don't understand."

"I shot a man once," says Johnny. "At Toyah, Texas. He needed shootin'—and the jury said it was self-defense. But he left an old maid cousin who was dependent on him for her living, so I promised her that as long as she needed it, I'd always send her half my wages to make up for shootin' her means of support. But now she don't need it any more, so—"

"But—but she says she'll see you soon. Is she—I mean—is she coming here or—"

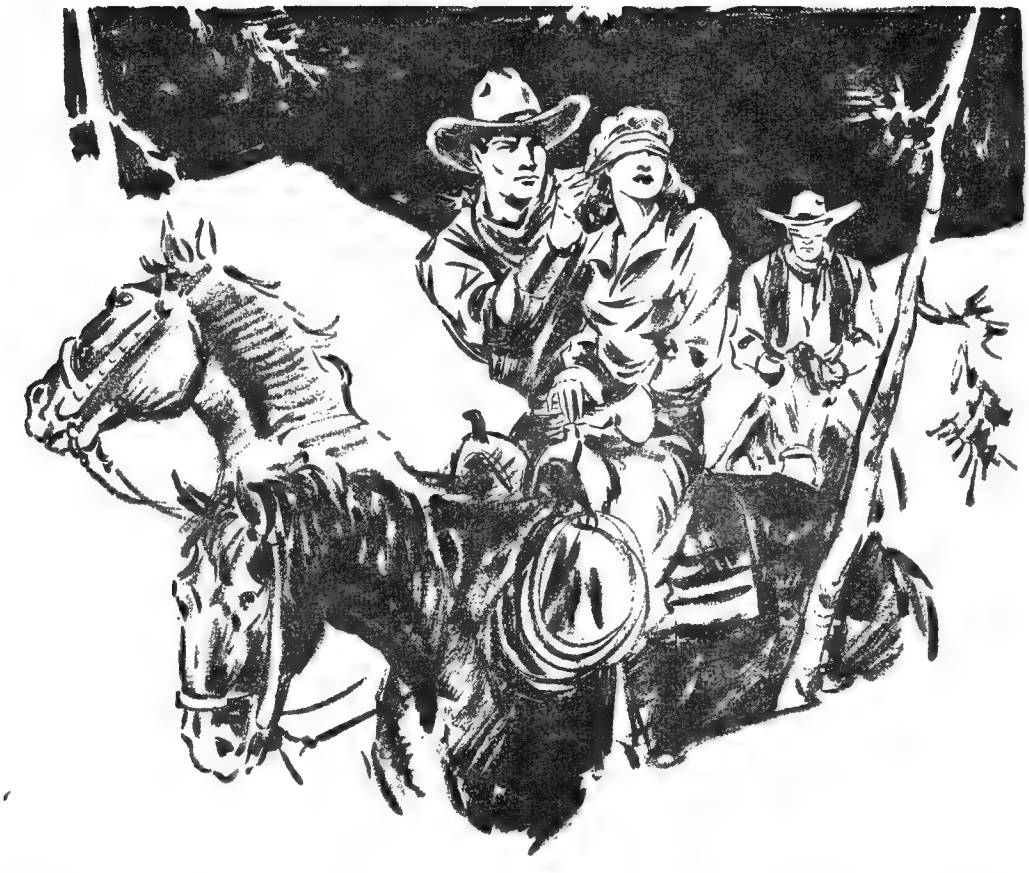
"I sure ain't goin' after her!" busts in ol' Doc Lambert, prouder'n a pink-feathered peacock. "Seem like I wasn't havin' no luck with them widders in the matrimony catylogues, so I just borrowed Geraldine's address off'n one of Johnny's letters and wrote to her, and dang if it wasn't practically a case of love at first write. Now, bustle my britches, she's comin' to look me over, and if you and Tom's ready, Miss Linda, I figger we could make it a double weddin' and—"

"Why, it sure suits me," busts in Tom Tanner. "If Linda—"

"Tom," says Linda Smith, kinder pattin' his hand, "you're a nice boy, and I like you, but—" She turns them blue-blue eyes of her up to Johnny Highstone's gray ones.

"But you ain't her Johnny," observes ol' Elbow with a chuckle. "Come on, you tenor-singer and the rest of you—let's go some place else to skin our hawg."

And Johnny Highstone, for once, is too busy reachin' his arms around a gal to ask him what color.



Loyalty Comes Hard

By Clee Woods

To back the friends of his youth or the family of the girl he loved—that was the hard choice facing Jed Hall. He wouldn't have been himself if he'd taken the easy way out.

HE TURNED back the flowered red oilcloth and tacked a seven-foot length of soft latigo leather to the table edge. With a keen knife blade he began to shave a feather edge on the latigo leather.

She was using the end of her blue calico apron as she turned the big rib roast and shoved it back into the oven. Next she took the coffee mill from the shelf, sat down on the big full woodbox and held the mill between her knees while she ground the freshly roasted coffee.

"You know, Jed," she said, "I heard you bought that big wild stallion from Luke Wright."

Jed Hall kept his lanky, rawboned frame bent over his work. He tried to fight back a flush from a long, rawboned face, although it was too deeply stamped by sun and wind for a mild flush to show.

Breaking horses was the thing Jed

loved most in life, except to drop by this Montana ranch house and talk to Mary. He didn't have time to be here today, but while he lingered he was wrapping his saddle horn, a piece of work that had to be done before he could join the K Spear roundup tomorrow morning.

"Yes, I did buy that horse," he finally answered Mary.

He took the feather-edged strap from the table and moved over to his saddle on the big wooden bench. With a shingle nail and hammer, he nailed one end of the latigo leather up under the arch of his saddle, left of the center.

"Going to try to break a horse like that?" Mary persisted.

Jed now was wrapping the metal horn with friction tape. His big, heavy fingers got in the way of each other. Her questions had him cornered. She knew that he didn't have a dollar to put into any horse. She quit grinding coffee and pulled the small till out.

"Look, bird's nest," she smiled.

Because of the round burs, the ground coffee had dropped down into the till in the form of a nest.

"More like a crater," he said.

She poured the coffee into the boiling water of a gallon pot and looked out the window. Thoughtfully she tucked in a strand of chestnut-brown hair. Through the lodgepole pines she saw her brother-in-law and another man riding up the ridge trail, coming pretty fast toward the house.

"I gave Luke my note for the wild one," Jed explained.

That was like him, to come back to an unpleasant subject because he didn't like to wiggle out of anything.

"Then the stallion got away from me," he added. "Two hundred bucks gone on four hoofs just like that," and his big fingers snapped.

He wrapped the strip of latigo leather round and round the horn and then onto the horn cap. At each wrap he pulled the leather as tight as angular arms could stretch it.

Mary came over and made him face her. He loomed big and ungainly over her slim form. There was something more than an understanding smile in her soft blue eyes.

"Jed Hall," she accused, "you're just plain chicken-hearted."

"Luke Wright breaks a horse the mean way," he defended.

"And you wouldn't break that wild sorrel's spirit even the way your gentling system called for."

"He was a mighty pretty fellow," Jed confessed at last. "Proud as all sin, and never made for cinch galls and rope burns—they'd rope burned him a dozen places before they got him into a corral. So I turned 'im back onto his home range."

Jed had begun putting on the second layer of friction tape when two men pulled up at the side gate. Alex Collingford, foreman out here for the K Spear. With him was Homer Brown, deputy sheriff.

"Something's wrong," Mary told Jed. "Let's try not to let Helen be disturbed."

Her sister Helen was in a bedroom at the other end of the long log house. The family feared that Helen wasn't going to live long.

The two men hurried into the kitchen. Collingford, Helen's husband, had a queer look on his face. He was a slim, quick-eyed fellow, and extremely handsome.

"I've been robbed, Mary," he announced. Then he gave Jed a dirty look out of the corner of a gray eye.

"Robbed?" Mary echoed. "Who? Where?"

"There was a run on the Wadetown bank," Collingford recited. "The boss is the president, you know. He sent Smoky Sawyers and me high-tailing it to the Lockwood bank for more cash. The Lockwood bank could send only twelve thousand—and that was taken away from me on the Hemlock ridge trail."

Collingford fixed Jed with an unfriendly stare. Collingford was a proud, ambitious man, and he had always

frowned when he found Jed here to see his wife's sister. For Jed was just a cowboy struggling to get a start.

"And I know the birds who robbed me, Hall," Collingford stated with flat finality.

It was the way he said it that made Jed come up straight and stiff. He might as well have called the four Ansted brothers by name. More than this, though, Collingford's tone seemed to implicate Jed himself.

THIRTEEN years before this a father, mother and two little boys had gone through the ice and drowned in the Yellowstone River. The old wagon and team had constituted all the earthly goods of the family, and Jed, the nine-year-old boy who survived, had starved when he couldn't find odd jobs in the dying mining camp. He wouldn't beg.

One bitter cold night the four Ansted brothers picked that kid up off the street, ill from cold and hunger, and took him home to as good a mother as ever loved a boy. After that, the reckless Ansted boys lost the greater part of their ranch to a shady money lender through a questionable court decision. That rankled and they turned to robbery. Big, smooth jobs, far apart, with heady work behind them, but outlawry just the same.

They kept nothing from the gangling boy who was growing up in their home. To them he was just a kid brother who shared their indignation at the unjust court decision. Their mother had become his mother.

But Jed quit them at fourteen, when he began to see what it all meant. He had taken to bronc-breaking before he was sixteen. Two years later he bought a section of land and started his own little spread. Now, at twenty-two, he was getting ahead, what with always keeping on hand a bunch of broncs to break for some rancher who wanted well gentled cow-ponies.

Jed still went back often to see good old Ma Ansted.

Jed had no immediate answer to Collingford's challenge. He turned back to the task of carrying his leather strip to the top of the horn cap.

"Mary," Collingford said to his sister-in-law, "you go tell Helen. I'm going with Homer and a posse to the mountains after the Ansted brothers."

"Helen mustn't know," Mary declared. "I sent the children off to play just to keep her quiet."

"How did it happen," Jed asked Collingford, "that you fell in with a deputy sheriff so handy?"

"The boss," Collingford answered very readily, "got uneasy about that dough he had sent for. So he sends Homer to see about us. I met him not two miles from where I was robbed."

"And Smoky?" Jed next inquired.

"He went into a bar for a drink while the Lockwood bank fixed up the dough. And—well, you know Smoky when he gets his foot on a rail. I had to leave him there. But he'd blabbed about the money we'd come for, and that's the way the Ansteds found out about it."

"Were they in Lockwood at the time?" Jed asked.

"How do I know? Outlaws don't always show their faces when they're wolfing around. Anyhow, the Ansteds have an undercover man on this side of the mountain, too."

There was a sudden hardening in the lanky Jed's deep voice. His rugged, homely face was draining of color. Collingford stepped nearer. "And if the boot fits, wear it," he told Jed.

Jed's big fists were clenched, but he kept them hanging at his side like ready mauls. Deputy Brown pushed between them.

"Listen, Jed," he said. "I've never gone as far as that in my thinkin'. But it's come time that you've got to throw the Ansted brothers down or gallop with the gang. I want you to take me and a posse to their hide-out tonight."

On Jed's face there was a sickly paleness beneath that brown skin. Both Col-

lingford and the deputy faced him as though they had him cornered. Jed let them stand there while he tacked the end of the latigo leather under the saddle arch beside the first end tacked there. He cut off the surplus length. Mary looked out the window to see that Helen's three little girls were not coming back to hear any of this. Then she put the red-and-white tablecloth on and began to set the table.

"You know their hide-out," Brown laid down his ultimatum. "And you'll take us to it, Jed, or go to jail."

"He knows right now," Collingford put in, "where the Ansteds are heading with that twelve thousand dollars."

The Ansted brothers still owned the remnant of their former big holdings, and their mother lived there with a Blackfoot Indian couple. But the four brothers had never been found there on the three occasions a sheriff had searched the place. They had some secret hide-out in the mountains back of their mother's home.

"I know enough," Jed at last measured out his answer, "that I don't see how the Ansted brothers could have been in Lockwood this morning at all, to say nothing of being there long enough to plan a robbery."

"I only said they caught me on the trail," Collingford corrected.

"And," Jed came at last to his point, "you happened to be alone, it seems. No witness to this robbery. You even got Smoky drunk and left him."

"Jed," Mary cried, dropping the knives and forks in her hands, "do you realize what you're saying?"

"I'm afraid I do," Jed replied. "But I'll say it a little plainer. It looks to me as though your sister's husband is trying to steal twelve thousand dollars from Mr. Kendrick and blame it on my friends. On me, too, if he could."

Collingford laughed as if at the very ridiculousness of the accusation. Mary had Jed by the arm, shaking him and looking up into his face beseechingly.

"No, no, Jed, don't say that again," she begged. "It'll kill Helen, whether it's true or not. And I'll tell you right now I think it's utterly crazy. Alex a double-crossing thief? It's worse than crazy, it's criminal, when you know Helen must be thought of too."

"I've thought of Helen and the kids," Jed declared. "But when any man comes at me like Collingford has, I aim to see whose hands are really dirty."

"No, Jed," Mary begged. "At least give Alex the benefit of the doubt. He's never done a crooked thing in his life before, and we do know the Ansteds are bigtime outlaws."

"So big," Homer Brown added, "that it will elect me sheriff seven weeks from today if I capture them with this loot on them."

"But if you fail," Jed reminded, "old man Kendrick is going to be in a mighty ugly temper. His bank is sure to bust, now, that this money fails to reach it. He'll likely lose this ranch, too, before it's over. He's a cold-blooded old fellow, and he's sure to ask how Alex Collingford was careless enough to let Smoky get drunk on important business like this."

"He's right, Alex," the girl agreed. "We've got to catch the Ansted brothers cold, or you'll be under strong suspicion."

"He'll be in jail," Jed insisted.

"We'll be ruined, in any case," Mary declared. "You'll lose your job, Alex, and then where'll we be? Jed, you've got to help catch those Ansted robbers with this loot."

"Take me to their hide-out, Jed," deputy Brown put in, "or you're under arrest right now for aiding and abetting."

Brown was overly anxious. The race in the forthcoming election was close.

"Yes or no—which is it, Jed?" Brown called for the showdown.

"Brown," Jed pleaded, "you're asking me to double-cross four men who've been more than brothers to me. They never robbed Collingford, but once you got them in jail they'd be sent up on some other charge. That'd leave poor old Ma Ansted pretty much alone up

there on her ranch. And she loves her four boys. My own mother couldn't mean any more to me than Ma Ansted does."

"You heard what Brown said," Collingford put in. "Put the iron bracelets on him, Brown."

Brown fumbled a pair of handcuffs from his pocket. This was his chance. Every bank depositor in the county would vote for the man who landed the Ansteds in jail. Jed was the key to that victory.

"Jed," Mary besought the cornered cowboy, "don't hold out because of any false notion of loyalty to those outlaws. They'd never do it for you."

"All I know is what they did do for me," Jed answered.

"Then stick out your hands for these," the deputy ordered, speaking crisply.

Jed's hands came forward slowly; Brown clicked a manacle onto his left wrist. But before Brown got the second wrist imprisoned, something broke loose in Jed Hall. His right fist jerked away and crashed into Brown's jaw. The left crossed with it, the handcuffs jangling. Then came the right again. Brown fell, addled.

Jed, unarmed, grabbed Brown's six-shooter and stopped the backward motion of Collingford's right hand.

"Now," Jed told Collingford, "I'm taking you to the Ansted hide-out. If they have Mr. Kendrick's money, I'll get it back for you. If they don't have it, you take your medicine, Collingford. Brown can go back to town and wait for us there."

"Jed," Mary again pleaded, "you'll kill my sister. Alex might be sent up and still be innocent."

"We'll know he's guilty before they arrest him," Jed assured her. "No man hates to hurt Helen more than I do. But how about Ma Ansted? They're still her boys to her. Just figure what it'll cost her for me to betray her boys about a holdup that Collingford may have made up out of whole cloth to cover his own big steal."

MARY stepped nearer Jed and took hold of both his long arms. Her lovely young face lifted up at him, and her dark-blue eyes were on fire.

"Listen, Jed," she told him. "It's just a matter of making a choice. Nothing more."

That was all she said, but he could feel a tremble in the hands on his arms. It must be this slim little cowgirl in the red calico dress or four hard bandits who had taken a sick, starving kid home and fed him and bought him the finest new boots and saddle money could buy.

She didn't stipulate any further conditions. Whether Alex was guilty or not guilty, she demanded that Jed stand by her and her pathetic family. There had never been a word of love spoken between Mary and Jed. Until now he had only been hoping and waiting. But those misty eyes turned up to his face just now told him that she loved him. At the same time they said that she meant this choice of his to be as final as death itself.

"God, girl, I do love you!" Jed whispered down at her.

She didn't seem able to make any reply. Jed tried to speak, but he too couldn't force out the words.

Suddenly he turned sharply on Collingford. "You're going with me to talk to the Ansted boys," he informed the brother-in-law. "First, though, tell this girl and Brown here just how you claim the Ansteds went about this robbery."

Collingford made a hasty recital of his story, one that promised to hold water.

"Now," Jed declared, "if the Ansted brothers can prove they were somewhere else, Collingford, that would leave you in a bad hole. Let's get going."

Jed didn't look back at her house. He heard Mary take the roast from the oven and call the little girls from their play. She was trying to show him she

could go right ahead without him.

Collingford tried to talk Jed out of the long, arduous ride into the mountains.

"An early snow might catch us before we make it out of there," he argued.

"The mountains are as dry as powder right now," Jed countered. "No matter if it snows two feet, though, we're still going in to talk to the Ansted boys."

Jed made Collingford rope and saddle a fresh horse for himself and cinched up his own Barney, a hammerhead bay with little sense but lots of staying power. Behind his saddle Jed tied a piece of green cowhide cut from a hide that had been hung on one of the cattle-guard posts to spook back too venturesome cattle.

While Jed was doing this, Brown tore a small notebook hastily to bits. These pieces he hid carefully in the tail of Collingford's mount, and under mane and saddle blanket. He even slid some under the back jockey and beneath the fenders. Just enough in each place for a piece to work out occasionally and flutter down.

Jed looked around as Mary came from the house.

"Jed," Mary told him flatly, "I'm going with you."

"But you can't leave your sister."

"It's more important for me to get Helen's husband back alive than that I stay and wait on her. Old Jinny's here, and she's good if she is a squaw."

Jed saw it was no use to argue, but he had one last say: "If you go, you'll be blindfolded the last five miles, the same as Collingford."

"Fair enough," she agreed.

"Brown," Jed told the deputy, "hit for town and don't try to follow us. I'll know how to lose a trail in these mountains."

Brown gave him a surly look, didn't answer but rode off.

With both the girl and Collingford unarmed, Jed started them off ahead of him. Not, though, straight for the Ansted hide-out. After a long, rough pull up a creek, Jed quit the water with his party and fell in behind a bunch of loose range horses. When the loose saddle stock scattered, Jed wrapped the feet of all three mounts with green cowhide boots. The booted hoofs would make nothing but round impressions on the dry earth. It would be hard for any ordinary trailer to tell in which direction the animals were traveling, especially at night.

But at night it also was impossible for Jed to notice the bits of paper dropping. White things that would show up in the light of a lantern now and then, to indicate the general direction of the party.

When they got deep into the rough mountains, it was so dark that it took the instinct of an animal to find the unblazed trail. But Jed knew it well. Half a mile across the lower end of a rock slide. Through a twisting, rock-walled pass. Two miles around a rocky ledge where even deer and elk seldom fed. Then a little hidden valley, with a small lake and a grassy park opening out from spruce, fir and aspen.

THE log cabin stood back in the aspens, out of sight of a chance look up the valley. It was barely daybreak, but smoke was beginning to boil out the chimney top.

Jed did not remove the blindfolds until he had the two people in the presence of the Ansteds. They were big, powerful men, nearing middle age. Plenty of strength and intelligence in their clean-shaven faces.

" 'Light and go in," Jed ordered Collingford.

Inside the cabin, venison was frying in a big skillet on bare coals. Earl Ansted piled hot ashes onto the heated Dutch oven lid to cook the biscuits. Buck combed his thick black hair.

"What you cowboys been doing?" Jed made an odd beginning.

All of them looked their puzzlement.

They knew that Jed never asked useless questions. They didn't answer specifically.

"Pull up and have a little chuck," invited Mike, the oldest.

The three visitors ate breakfast with the Ansteds without another question being asked, but Collingford got some mighty straight looks. After breakfast there was useless milling around before Jed came back to the important question put another way: "You fellows busy yesterday?"

"Well," said Buck, "I shod five horses yesterday and half-soled my boots. Jim and Mike rounded up our saddle stock and packed up some extra duffle—for we're clearin' out of here. Earl went to see his girl, Katy Allison, and just got back about four this morning."

"There's not an alibi in the whole setup," Collingford exclaimed defiantly.

"Alibi for what?" Earl wanted to know.

"He claims," Jed explained, "that you boys robbed him yesterday of twelve thousand dollars."

There followed hard words and an ugly threat to Collingford. But Jed broke through all this to ask, "Where had you boys meant to go?"

"Plenty far," Mike vowed. "We grub-staked eighteen prospectors once when we were off on a trip while things quieted down behind us here. One has hit it big. Silver and lead."

"It's a proud day for me, fellers," Jed declared. "But we've still got to scotch Collingford's accusation. Where did you get the horseshoes and the sole leather?"

"In New Piney."

New Piney was a small gold boom town that gave a precarious welcome even to outlaws. It lay west of the mountains, at least sixty miles from Lockwood.

"When did you buy these things there?" Jed next asked, firing his cross-examination tersely.

"After dark, night before last."

"All four of you brothers there then?"

"We never go into town any other way," Earl revealed an interesting truth.

"Now," said Jed, "we'll get witnesses to the fresh shod horses and get proof the horseshoes were bought night before last. Considering mountain trails to be crossed, that makes it impossible for you four boys to have been in Lockwood yesterday morning—"

Jed cut off his words. Then four brothers leaped to door and corner for rifles. The place was surrounded by a posse!

"Come out of there, hands over your heads," Deputy Brown was calling.

The Ansteds were not so excited after they had Winchesters in their hands. They looked at Jed. Earl, inflammable by nature, strode over to their adopted brother.

"So," he said, and Jed winced at the tone, "at last you've turned on us, huh? And all because you're goofy over this girl—Collingford's sister-in-law. Well, I wish I was low enough to put a bullet through you. But there's something I can give you with plenty of heart."

Earl sent a fist looping into Jed's jaw. Jed saw the blow coming, but he didn't try to block or duck it. He just stood there and took it, and it rocked him back onto his heels. Earl hit him the second time; Jed's knees buckled beneath him and he fell backward.

"And you," Earl flew at Collingford, "before your posse gets us, you'll wish you'd never tried to unload your own thievin' trick onto the Ansted brothers."

Earl clubbed his rifle and brought it crashing at Collingford's head. Collingford partially dodged the blow and shrieked for help to those outside. Mary ran between them.

Mike Ansted pushed Earl back. "Go out there, Collingford," Mike ordered the brother-in-law, "and pull one of your horses into this room. But just try once to make a break, and you're a dead man."

It took a harsh second command to send Collingford to the odd task. When Brown saw the horse being pulled toward the door, he shouted angrily at Collingford. But Collingford cast a fearful glance through the door at three cocked guns, and pulled the snorting horse into the room.

The deputy hurled a demand at the Ansteds to surrender. That was refused with an ominous calm.

"Surely, then," Brown challenged the Ansteds, "you'll turn Mary and Collingford loose before the fight starts."

"Mary can go," Mike answered. "But Collingford stays until he tells where he cached the dough that he claims we took from him."

But Mary stayed through the hectic moments of angry, impatient talk that was flung back and forth. Useless talk. The Ansteds were going to fight.

"Boys," said Jed, "if it comes down to a fight, I'm with you."

"Don't try to save your own hide by any such bootlickin' now," Mike retorted. "One of you has to die, either the traitor or the thief."

He looked from Jed to Collingford, and the scornful look ranked them both together.

"We're tyin' one of you on that horse," Mike explained. "Then we'll whip it out the door through the smoke screen. The man on the horse will draw the posse's fire, for they'll think it's one of us. While the guns cut that man down, the Ansted brothers will make a break. We need only five seconds to clear that first thirty yards."

That meant a race to the hidden opening of an old crosscut in the hillside back of the cabin. Only they and Jed knew that this crosscut led into a mine tunnel which had been abandoned by its recluse owner years before. The Ansteds had closed the mouth of the tunnel by a heavy discharge of dynamite, thus leaving only the crosscut for an entrance. Then they had finished opening a stope which led upward from the tunnel to the top of the ridge.

"Heads or tails?" Earl demanded of Jed.

Earl's look was just as hard as Mike's. He had a twenty-dollar gold piece in his hand.

"I'll take heads," Collingford put in, as if he feared a conspiracy against him. "That is, heads up I stay and you ride out."

Jed accepted in silence the way his old friends had elected to settle this life and death matter. Earl flipped the yellow coin into the air. It struck on its side, then rolled across the rough floor. Every eye was upon it. A life was hanging on the way it fell. It struck a crack and wobbled. Then it was toppling over.

"Heads!" said three voices at once.

One of those voices was Mary's, but the word fell from her lips in such low anguish that the others never heard it.

JED got into the saddle. Mike and Earl began to tie his feet beneath the horse. Jim took from the wall a large old Blackfoot Indian bow and two arrows. These had been kept here for a purpose. Jim wrapped a rag about the tips of the arrows, and then dipped the wrapped tips into the full bowl of the kerosene lamp.

"Mary," said Mike, "we've known you since you were just cuttin' your teeth, 'way back there when we were respectable cowboys. We can't let you get hurt. We hate to hurt Collingford's family, but that's the biggest pity of an ornery man's doin's—like our mother gets hurt. You, Mary, you better go."

He nodded out the door. Mary looked at Collingford.

Mike said slowly, "He can follow you out—but only after he tells where he cached old man Kendrick's twelve thousand dollars."

"But what if he can't?" Mary demanded.

"He can and he will tell—or die, just as he pleases."

Jed, now tied on the horse, saw that

the Ansteds meant to go through with their program.

"You better go," Jed told Mary.

The girl's face was as pale as death, but Jed saw something in her eyes. Not stark fear nor abject despair, but fierce courage.

"All right," she said, "I'll go."

She went out the door. Mike pointed a cocked six-shooter at Collingford's head.

"Now yell the truth out to Brown," Mike ordered. "I'll blow your brains all over this floor if you don't."

Collingford looked at the granite faces around him and wilted. Hysterically he jabbered out where the twelve thousand dollars would be found. Then Mike seized him by the collar and shoved him out the front door, giving him a kick as he went.

Collingford broke into a terrified run. Over his head went a blazing arrow, and it fell into dry aspen and alder leaves on the edge of the woods. A second arrow started another fire. Smoke boiled up from both, sending a smoke cloud drifting back over the cabin. Through such a haze, the posse would not be able to distinguish Jed from an Ansted in the first few jumps of the horse.

"I can't stop you now, boys," Jed had his last say, "but you'll learn some day I didn't sell you out—not even for her."

"Actions talk today, not words," Mike replied, and his own voice was tense. "You got us into this, now get us out."

He pulled the horse's head to the door. Earl and Buck lashed the animal out. The horse was no more than on its third leap when Jed heard the guns break loose. A bullet burned hot across his chest; another cut through his hat and tugged fiercely at his thick black hair.

Then Jed realized that he wasn't alone on this life and death ride. Mary was running by his side, with a hand clutching the rein. She was trying to screen him as well as she could with her own body while she shouted frenziedly at the posse to hold its fire.

The guns kept on roaring. But Jed discovered that they were trying now for a new target, the Ansteds on the last ten yards of their desperate dash.

A hundred yards from the cabin, Jed realized that Mary had turned the fire from him. He wasn't seriously hurt. The posse quit firing when the Ansteds disappeared beneath what had seemed to be only the top of a recently fallen pine tree.

Mary jerked loose the rawhide that held Jed. The four brothers had not quite had time to reach the stope exit yet. Jed had to make it safe for them.

"You might've been shot trying to save me, Mary," he blurted out to her. "I'll never forget it. Do just one thing more for me."

"What's that?"

"Get in behind that brush fire and take up the ridge there. On the south side of the ridge you'll see a big patch of kinnikinnick. When a piece of that kinnikinnick turns back, the Ansted brothers are coming out through a hidden mine door. Tell 'em I could have sent the posse as easy as you, if I meant to double-cross them. Tell 'em also that I'm firin' the brush down below the park, as if to backfire on this fire and stop it. But my new fires will hold the posse for the Ansteds till they're safe on their way. Then tell the boys I'll wait for 'em down at the Inside Elbow—just to shake their hands before they leave."

Jed hurried away to his task of making fires fight the posse. That done, he waited anxious minutes, while his wound, though minor, stained his breast a deep crimson. Would the Ansteds come? Or would some of the posse break through the fire?

No. There came Mike, Buck, Jim and Earl. Mary with them.

But while the party was almost within earshot of Jed, the four brothers still remained in doubt about Jed. Mary saw that they just couldn't quite get over the fact that Jed had come into

their hide-out with a posse at his back.

"But don't you *feel* that Jed never could have betrayed you?" she pleaded. "You Ansteds love your mountains. Above all else, though, you love your freedom. Jed knows both those things. It's not in his heart to put men like you behind pen walls. He couldn't even see a wild stallion conquered and broken. He went in debt to Luke Wright for that big bay stallion—and turned him loose."

"But how did that posse get to our hide-out if Jed didn't lead 'em?" Mike Ansted asked.

"Brown must have followed us somehow without our seeing him. Or maybe he and Alex had some kind of signals fixed up. I don't know, but I *do* know that Jed didn't betray you."

"Well—mebbe," Earl Ansted said uncertainly. "Anyway, Jed did give a note for that bay stallion and then opened the corral gate. And it sure ain't like him to squeal on us. I'm takin' the kid's paw before I quit this country."

The four brothers nodded in solemn agreement. They came up to Jed and wrung his hand.

"Jed, take good care of Ma," Mike begged. "Tell her we're goin' straight from here on—forever. And that she'll hear from us, come the right time."

Then they rode away, four stalwart men never meant to be outlaws.

It was time for Jed to part from Mary. He had Collingford on the way to the pen. Mary's sister might die from the shock. He had chosen the Ansteds instead of her family. Now it was all over.

"Good-by, Mary," he said.

Mary took his proferred hand. She was going through with it. She had it in her to stick by her folks.

Then Mary had started to cry. "No, no, Jed!" she suddenly let her heart break loose. "Helen and the little girls —well, more than ever now they'll need a man around. I mean a *man*, too." Then she added in a low sob, "So will I, Jed!"

A glimpse of the next issue

The Honor of Muddy Elbow

The story of a town that made good

By AMOS MOORE

Windy's Lucky Day

A tale of Windy's uproarious doings

By ROBERT ENDERS ALLEN

Cowboy Lore

Leaves From a Cowboy's Sketch Book

By Walt Mead

Cutting Horses

ONE of the most valuable animals on the range any day in the week is a cutting horse. Not only is he highly trained but he must possess that strange something called natural ability which puts him head and shoulders above his ordinary range mates. He is used during fall roundups in separating the cattle to be shipped from the main herd. This herd is again trimmed until only the top steers remain.

I've seen several good cutting horses in my time. I once knew a cowman who wouldn't listen to any price where his top cutter was concerned. It is little wonder that they are so valuable, because only once in a blue moon will you find a cutting horse worthy of the name. He must be physically and mentally alert—as quick to see and understand the nature of range cattle as the man who rides him.

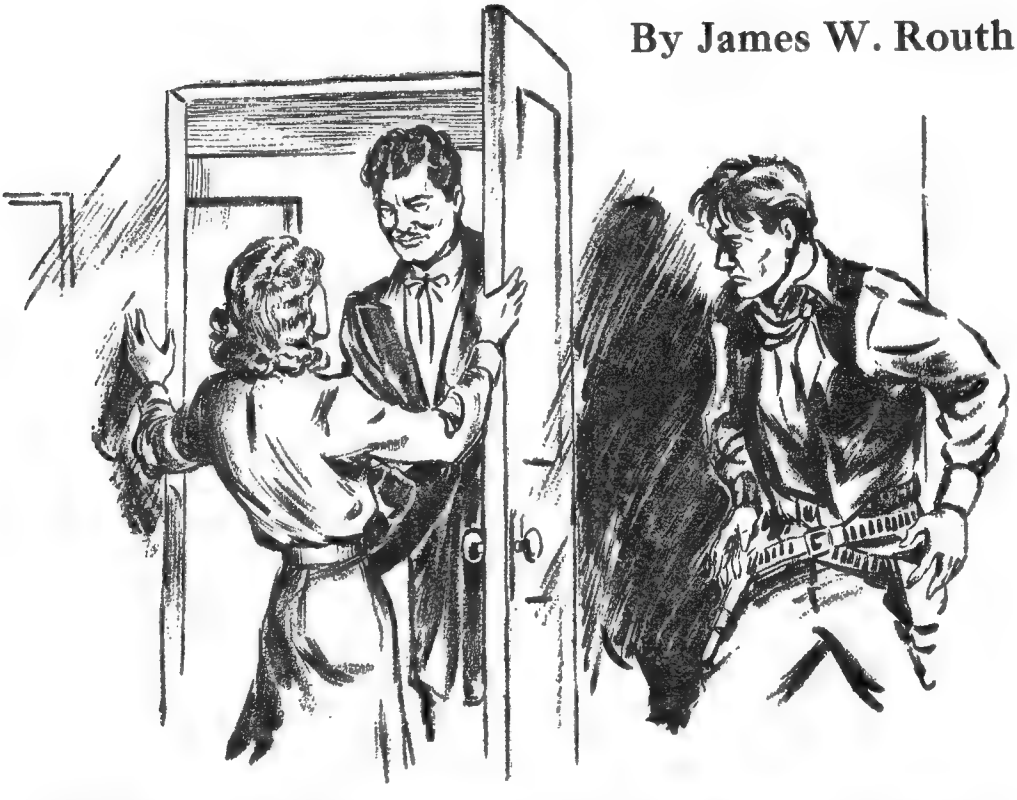
It takes a mighty good hand to work smoothly with a top cutter, and if the rider is not skillful he may find himself taking up "squatter's rights" amongst the sage. A good cutter can stop, wheel, and dash away on a new course in a twinkling. Not only that, but if the steer persists in circling back to the herd, said steer is likely to lose a chunk of hide, because a top cutter takes a furious delight in nipping a stubborn creature.

Cutting horses are trained like any other cow-horse, to begin with. That is, they are taught to neck rein, to wheel this way and that. If a horse has natural ability combined with cow sense, he'll never allow an onery critter to outdodge him on the range.

Good cutting horses are seldom used for any other type of ranch work, and although they have been trained for roping you'll never see a cowman use one to tie onto anything more dangerous than a spring calf.

Windup at Sidewinder

By James W. Routh



There was evil in the air of Sidewinder, there was danger even in walking its sordid streets . . . till the day Slim Danvers blazed out with flaming guns.

I

"THE gent that branded her Sidewinder shore called the turn! 'Tain't good sense for us to be in reach of her poison."

Thus spoke Dusty Rand as his bay pony drew up alongside of his partner's buckskin at the crest of the hill. Slim Danvers offered no reply. He bent a long leg around the horn of his saddle and reached for the makings. The dying boomtown of Sidewinder sprawled untidily below them at the mouth of Skeleton Canyon. Twin rows of sprawling adobe and ramshackle frame buildings bordered a dusty road that writhed eastward into the desert. A kind of venomous haze seemed to rise from the huddle of mud and decaying wood.

Dusty continued querilously: "Blast you, tall feller! When you grab yourself a trance you shore stay with it!"

Danvers grinned a slow grin that drew up the corners of his wide mouth and deepened the squint creases about his steady gray eyes.

"Trouble is," he drawled, "you don't *sabe* how a man can concentrate."

These were the first words out of him in the dozen miles they'd traveled from their small Box D Ranch. Having uttered them, and explained nothing of the reason for the trip, he bent in the

end of his brown paper cigarette and continued to stare down thoughtfully at the dying town. A hell town, if he'd ever known one, he thought grimly. And ruled over by as slick a crook as ever cold decked a roistering cowhand or flimflammed an innocent tenderfoot.

"Stage is late," he observed. "Comin' fast now."

"An' that, I judge," snapped Dusty, "is the reason for us sashayin' over here where we're as popular as smallpox! Jest to see is the stage late or on time! Hell!"

"You'd be surprised, runt," murmured the tall cowboy.

With that he straightened his bent leg and started his horse down the slope. Dusty, swearing explosively, followed.

They clattered into town from the west just as the old stagecoach, drawn by four galloping horses, swayed around a bend and came careening down the road from the east. It came fast, pursued by dust and yelping dogs, and preceded by something that caused Slim Danvers to straighten alertly in his saddle. Riding beside him, Dusty muttered uneasily and jumped his pony a bit ahead of the buckskin.

"Watch it! There's somethin'—"

A startled yell built up into a roar of sound that swept through the town. Men ran along the street.

Danvers rode abreast of Dusty. "Look!"

The whole town was looking, looking as it yelled and stampeded toward the express depot. For on the driver's box of the lurching stage, straining back against the reins to slow the speed of the galloping horses, stood a woman!

And suddenly the sound that rolled up through Sidewinder became coherent.

"Holdup! The stage's been robbed!"

Two men, one of whom was the express agent, Jack Peters, caught the heads of the lead horses. Pounding hoofs churned up dust. The stage came to a creaking stop. Peters yelled:

"All right! Turn 'em loose! What happened? Where's Jackson an' Field?"

Hoof clatter momentarily drowned out the woman's reply, and the plunging horses gave Peters and the other man trouble. The woman still leaned back against the taut reins, the wind whipping her skirts, rippling her uncovered golden hair. And then her voice lifted shrilly through the uproar.

"Get a doctor! There's a wounded man in the coach!"

Slim Danvers was already out of the saddle, thrusting his way through the gathering crowd, with Dusty at his heels. At this cry he swerved sharply toward the side of the coach, but as he reached for the handle of the door a powerful hand caught his arm.

"Keep your nose out, damn you, Danvers!"

A jerk and a thrust sent him reeling. He heard Dusty's warning cry, and out of the corner of his eye he saw that his partner also was in trouble. Leaping backward like a startled cat, the little puncher collided with a hulking giant who promptly wrapped both arms around him in a bear hug. At the same time a smaller man, who packed two guns and had a badge pinned to his vest, sidled in between Danvers and his partner.

"Keep your fur down, Rand, and you won't git hurt!" snapped town marshal Clip Barlow at Dusty. "Hobble him, Bat!"

Danvers heard and saw but his attention was fixed elsewhere. Almost spun off his feet by the unexpected attack, he took two stumbling steps to catch his balance. Instantly he swung back, alert and ready, and met Rick Blackwell's baleful glare.

"I'm still runnin' this town," growled the boss of Sidewinder. "You ain't wanted here, Danvers!"

Tall, powerfully built, clad in a frock coat and flat-brimmed, low-crowned hat, Blackwell made a striking figure. He was cleanly shaven save for a clipped mustache, and his features were boldly and handsomely cut. Manager of the Skeleton Canyon Mining Company, he

owned and controlled just about every profitable enterprise in the town as well. He also was the acknowledged leader of a powerful band of outlaws, Spider Kling, Mose Bently and others. They preyed upon the surrounding country and made Sidewinder no safe place for any honest man.

"So you are, Rick," drawled the tall cowboy. "But there's a wounded man yonder which needs help."

"He don't need yours," stated Blackwell harshly.

But he did not move; he stood there glowering at Danvers. And suddenly it seemed to the cowboy that there was something peculiar about this situation. Curiously he met the black-haired man's menacing look. The animus between them was nothing new, but Blackwell's present attitude was.

But the high point of the conflict between them had grown out of a double killing. Old Mark Hendry had sold the Box D to Danvers, then foreman, of Mark's Rafter T and Dusty Rand. The old man had taken the cash down payment and started East immediately to see the daughter he had not seen in many years. Old Mark had been dry-gulched. Jack Craig, a Rafter T hand, had been taken by the mob and hanged as the murderer, although there had been no proof at all that he had even seen old Mark on the desert road.

Word of the lynching had brought Danvers to town at the head of a committee of cowmen. They'd served notice on Blackwell; they'd warned the man that the killings and robberies and rustling must cease.

"You're responsible," Danvers had said. "And your coyotes have gone too far at last. You clean up this mess or we'll do it—and include you personal!"

"You can go to hell," Blackwell had flung back angrily. "I'm runnin' this town my way. Craig got what he rated, but there might of been another skunk in the deal that the boys didn't catch!"

His meaning was plain, but Danvers knew that no one who knew of his friendship for Mark Hendry would believe the insinuation. So he'd held his men in check.

"You've had your warnin'," he told Blackwell.

But in avoiding the showdown that day, Danvers never believed he'd done more than delay the inevitable. And since then he'd carried on quiet investigations, which included the secret hiring of a Pinkerton detective, to check up on Blackwell's activities.

All of this flashed through his memory as he watched the queer glint vanish from Blackwell's glittering eyes, saw them become cold and wary. And the wariness puzzled him. But there was no present explanation of it. Abruptly Blackwell turned his back.

"Keep your nose out," he growled.

Jerking open the door, the boss of Sidewinder thrust his powerful form inside the stage coach. At the same instant the town marshal signalled the hulking ruffian who held Dusty helpless, and himself backed in between Danvers and the door of the stage.

The giant released Dusty and backed away warily.

"Take it easy," he mumbled. "I jest kept you outa trouble, that'sall."

"Keep your dirty hands off me or you'll git your fill of trouble!" snarled Dusty. "For two cents I'd—"

"Let be, pardner," Danvers said quietly.

And then, unexpectedly, a strange thing happened. An invisible force seemed to turn him about, seemed to draw his glance upward.

The woman who had brought the stage to town was looking down at him from the step of the driver's box. She was a young woman; long limbed, full breasted, vigorously and gloriously lovely. Her golden hair moved like flame about her head. Her eyes were the dark blue of the desert sky at midnight; her lips curved with generous fullness above a firm chin, and her nose was short and straight.

More than this, there was something hauntingly familiar about her, as if he had known her before she came so

dramatically to Sidewinder that noon. Yet he knew that he had never seen her before.

Moving automatically, he stood beside the wheel of the coach. Her hands slipped into his, small, strong, warm. He felt the weight of her as she came down, so close that he could not breathe and dared not look at her. And when she drew her hands away it was as if some part of him went irrevocably with them.

"Thanks, cowboy!" she said softly.

Then he did look straight down into her lovely eyes. "You!" he murmured. "You!"

Warmth stained her cheeks. Then her eyes narrowed, and with a kind of resolute deliberation she tipped her head forward, turned away from him. And before he could figure that one out Peters was there, asking curt questions, and Blackwell and Clip Barlow were lifting the wounded stage driver out of the coach.

"About five miles out," the girl said. "The road was blocked at the bottom of a wash. The guard got down to clear the way, and they shot him. Then they ordered Jackson to throw down the mail sacks. He did it, but they shot him, too. There were three of them, all masked."

Dusty nudged Danvers. Blackwell, having seen Jackson carried into the rickety hotel building, came back and joined Peters. And now he seemed to have eyes only for the girl.

"A horrible experience, ma'am," said Blackwell, removing his hat with a courtly bow. "My name is Blackwell, mayor of Sidewinder. May I have the honor of escorting you to a quieter place, Miss—"

Dusty started forward, but Danvers restrained him. His own ears were alert to catch the young woman's name, but he failed to hear it. She turned away between Blackwell and Peters.

"Worse'n murder!" declared Dusty wrathfully. "What ails you? No decent woman should go with that feller."

"Hold it," Danvers said quietly. "There's plenty that's plumb queer about this proposition, runt!"

II

THE two cowboys moved into the shade of the hotel building, the decrepit frame structure into which the girl and her two escorts vanished.

"Mostly," Dusty complained, "you don't make sense."

Danvers eyed him bleakly. "Listen! Masked gents gunned Field and Jackson. They took the incomin' mail. Why?"

Dusty grunted. "Damn if that makes sense, neither!" Squinting narrowly at Danvers' tight-lipped face, he added: "You're holdin' out on me, tall feller!"

Danvers might not have heard. He stood deep in thought, frowning across the road to where Clip Barlow was organizing a posse. The town marshal looked like an overgrown spider armed with two guns. He walked with a limp and took orders from Rick Blackwell.

Abruptly, still without speaking, Danvers turned toward the hotel entrance. Dusty was at his heels when he ducked through the door into the gloom-filled lobby, where a row of ancient rocking chairs ringed a rusty stove. Stairs led up from the end of a battered desk; stairs that seemed to sag wearily from age. Blackwell, Jack Peters and the girl were talking in front of the desk.

"So you didn't get a look at any of 'em, Miss Smith?" Blackwell was saying.

The girl shook her head. Standing with her back to the desk, she sent a narrowed glance over Blackwell's shoulder and saw the partners near the door.

"They wore masks," she said. "I've already told you that."

"Too bad," observed the express agent. "But mebbe the posse 'll catch up with 'em."

"Perhaps," Blackwell agreed. "At any rate, no one could blame Miss

Smith for not knowing them if they were masked and men she'd never seen before. By the way, ma'am, what brought you to Sidewinder?"

The question was never answered. Something in the girl's face must have alarmed Blackwell. He turned swiftly just as Danvers started forward. The tall cowboy halted in mid-stride. Dusty stood fast, a little to the right of the door. Jack Peters muttered a startled oath. Blackwell stiffened, his hands touching the lapels of his long-tailed coat.

Outside on the street hoof clatter sounded as the posse rode out of town. Somewhere at the rear of the hotel someone was chopping wood. A curious expectancy gripped Slim Danvers, and an even more curious conviction took hold of him. The fate that had brought this lovely girl to Sidewinder had supplied the one element lacking thus far in the antagonism that lay between him and Rick Blackwell. As clearly as if he read the written words, it came to him that she would provide the spark that would set off the long expected explosion.

"Will it be now?" he wondered.

Something had held the black-haired man in check out on the street by the stage. Something, he suspected, that was of greater immediate importance than the settlement of their personal score. But now?

"Get out!" The two words came with the explosiveness of bullets. "Get out of town—and stay out, Danvers!"

Blackwell's rigidness broke as he spoke. He straightened, dropped his hands. Again, it seemed, he was not ready. Danvers smiled thinly, and spoke in a soft deliberate drawl.

"When I'm ready, Rick, and for as long as it suits me." Then, glancing at last at the girl, who returned his look strangely, he said gently: "You're in bad company, ma'am."

Blackwell's hands flicked toward his hidden guns. The girl gasped. But Dusty apparently had been expecting something of the sort. The little puncher's voice cracked like a whip-lash:

"Hold it!"

A leveled gun halted Blackwell. The man's handsome face was livid with fury, but he dropped his hands again.

"Let be," Danvers drawled. "Rick ain't pressin' for trouble—not now. Ma'am, you better not—"

"Please go!" she interrupted breathlessly. "Please!" Her expression changed. Color flooded her lovely face, drained out again swiftly. Her voice changed, too, becoming crisp, almost bitter as she said: "I'll choose my own company, Mister Danvers, if that is your name!"

Danvers took a deep breath and let it go out slowly, looking at her, trying to figure out what went on behind the mask of her face. Why was she so hostile? He moved his head. Even in view of Blackwell's grin of triumph, there was only one thing for him to do. He touched his hat, wheeled and shoved Dusty out the door ahead of him.

"Crazier'n a coot!" sputtered Dusty angrily. "Why didn't you let me plug him? Why—"

"Shut up!"

The two words came with the impact of bullets, and they stopped the little cowboy's protest just as effectively. One startled look at his partner's face told the full story. Never in his life had Danvers been so shaken by anger. It blazed like white heat in his gray eyes. It twisted his lips into a kind of snarl.

But even so his mind was clicking swiftly. The two words he spat at Dusty were the only evidence he let slip of the temper that raged in him. He wheeled with his back to the wall three paces west of the hotel entrance, and squinted across the street to where the abandoned stagecoach stood surrounded by a group of curious Mexican children. Dusty ranged beside him. They built smokes, shared a match.

All at once Dusty chuckled. " 'I'll choose my own company, Mister Danvers,' sez she! Some picker, that gal. Put you in your place, tall feller!"

Then, savagely, he swore and jerked what was left of his cigarette into the dust and swore again. Danvers, oddly enough, was restored to sanity by this. He grinned and gripped his partner's wiry shoulder.

"Leastwise she gave us some good advice, runt. Let's git to it. I was expectin' some important mail on that stage."

So saying, he started toward their horses. Dusty stared, then hustled to catch up.

They rode eastward out of town. The posse had gone this way ahead of them, but Danvers made no attempt to overtake it. Nor did he explain what was on his mind. Dusty, however, seemed to have reached some conclusion of his own, for the little puncher wore the shrewdly contented look of a man well pleased with himself and his world.

"So that's the reason for the holdup, huh?" he said. "That important mail. Such bein' the case, you sure have been holdin' out on me, blast you!"

To this Danvers made no reply. "Must have been a leak somewhere," he thought. "Blackwell is smart, and he has connections. But he might know what he stole would be missed."

His lips tightened suddenly on a stab of sharp uneasiness. He nudged his buckskin to a faster pace.

They were not far behind the posse in reaching the scene of the stage robbery.

"What you doin' here, Danvers?" demanded Clip Barlow.

The spidery town marshal seemed weighted down by his two guns and the badge pinned to his open vest. But there was rat-like hostility in his narrow face.

"Lookin' around, Clip," Danvers replied easily. "Any objections?"

Barlow hesitated, then shrugged. "Help yourself," he snapped.

Two of the possemen were lashing the body of the murdered shotgun guard over the back of a horse brought out for that purpose. The hoofprints of three horses led off towards the malpais, an area of black volcanic rock a few miles south. These prints led to where the two mail sacks lay, a quarter of a mile off the road. The sacks had been slashed open and their contents scattered. At Barlow's order, the possemen collected such of the mail as could be found.

"Ain't none of it addressed to you, Danvers," the marshal pointed out.

"What made you reckon I was expectin' mail today, Clip?" Danvers drawled.

They rode on, following the trail of the three bandits. It led straight to the malpais, and there it vanished. Barlow made a half-hearted gesture at further pursuit, but neither Danvers nor Dusty expected anything to come of it. No hoofprints would show on that glass-like rock. It was possible for a man who knew the few passable trails to ride into the badlands, but the cowboys had seen horses crippled by riders who attempted it. This lava rock would cut through shoes and hoofs.

"Same old story," Danvers said, building a smoke while his horse breathed. "There's no catchin' them hombres now. Not this way. They'll either hole up yonder in the hills or cross over into Mexico."

Dusty shot a swift glance at him but said nothing. Barlow spoke gruffly.

"You can head back when it pleases you."

"Right nice of you, Clip," the cowboy drawled.

Calmly enjoying his smoke, he watched the posse perform under the town marshal's orders. They spread out along the rim of the black rock, worked in cautiously. It was a good show, but Danvers knew that it meant exactly nothing. Neither Barlow nor his possemen expected nor wanted to catch up with the fugitives.

"Be interestin' if they did," Dusty opined, following the taller man's thought. "And sort of complicated, too, I reckon. You figger we're embarrassin' the boys, tall feller?"

Barlow scowled at this, but Danvers

only grinned. And having finished his smoke, he said they might as well head for home.

"We'll go by way of town and report that you're doin' your duty, Clip," he told Barlow gravely.

It was nearly sundown when the partners again rode into Sidewinder. Long shadows slanted across the dusty road. A peaceful hush lay over the sprawling village, where soft pastel hues reflected from the sky lent mud walls a kind of transient beauty at the day's end.

The looted stage coach had been hauled away. Hitchrails were almost deserted. A couple of shabbily clad old timers sat in tipped back chairs outside the hotel, smoking as they waited the supper call. Smoke lifted from kitchen chimneys, and the appetizing aroma of coffee blended with the mingled odors of sage and dust and horse. Dusty sniffed hungrily.

"I could do with a night in town," he said.

"Judge so," Danvers agreed. "Anyhow we'll eat here."

They left their horses in the town corral and ankled down to Spuds Fenton's small restaurant, one of the few establishments in town that was neither owned nor controlled by Blackwell. Fenton, one-time cook for the Rafter T, shared the cowmen's view about Blackwell and had been able to remain in business only because no rider off the range ever hit town without dropping in to buy at least coffee and sinkers from him.

And as they walked, Danvers thoughts turned to the girl who called herself Miss Smith. All that afternoon, out on the desert, her lovely face had haunted him. It seemed that he had known every feature and expression always, that he had known the girl herself from the beginning of time. The manner of her arrival at Sidewinder was far less strange than this feeling of his.

"And she knowed me at sight the same as I knowed her," he thought, lifting the saddle from the buckskin's back. "Her comin' here was meant to be."

Thought of the girl and Blackwell together, however, was disturbing. The conviction that had taken hold of him in the hotel returned powerfully. As a result of this girl's presence, the long delayed showdown between him and Blackwell would be brought about. He was as sure of that as he was of his own name and the fact that even before he had seen this girl today he had loved her. No other woman had ever been attractive to him because he had been waiting for this one to come into his life. And yet, because of her, either he or Rick Blackwell must die!

Dusty did not break into his partner's thoughts until they reached the restaurant. Then: "Wake up, tall feller, here we are."

"Sam Jackson still alive?" was Danvers' first question to the restaurant man.

"Yeah," Spuds replied, "But Doc says there ain't no hope for him. Mebbe he won't never come out of it a-tall."

"I was hopin' he would," Danvers said moodily. "If he could tell us—" He shrugged.

Dusty and Fenton nodded silently. If Jackson died without recovering consciousness, there was little chance that the men who had killed him and the shotgun guard and made off with the mail would ever be identified.

III

IT WAS dark when the partners left Fenton's beanery. Patches of yellow light spilled out of open doors and windows, made puddles on the plank walks and trickled over into the dust of the road. Overhead the cloudless sky was a blue-black blanket, set with a billion or so twinkling diamonds. From the Miners' Bar came the tinny tinkle of a piano and the shrill laughter of a woman. Passing the hotel, the two cowboys glimpsed blurred figures,

heard the quiet tone of a woman's voice and a man's reply.

"Thank you for what you've done, Mr. Blackwell."

"It's nothing at all, ma'am. Nothing at all. I'll see you later, then?"

Dusty muttered profanely, but Danvers went on without a sign that he had heard.

"Fast worker, that buzzard!" snarled the little puncher as they neared the corral. "If she's a decent woman—"

"Never think different, runt!" Danvers cut in.

"Then why?"

Back toward the center of town the boom of a single gunshot rolled up to the peaceful sky. Danvers halted, and his fingers gripped Dusty's shoulder like the jaws of a vise. Then, abruptly, he shoved the little man toward the corral gate.

"Saddle the broncs! I'll be back!"

He was gone before Dusty could voice a protest. Other men were running along the street, too, toward the hotel. The tall cowboy was among the first to arrive there, however, and collided with another man who came charging out as he was about to enter.

"Git the hell outa my way!" panted the man, who was a stranger to Danvers. "Got to fetch the Doc."

"What happened?" Danvers snapped.

"Some cuss poked a gun through a winder and plugged Sam Jackson again!"

Danvers let him go. But the tall cowboy did not go on inside the hotel. Something told him that nothing could do Sam Jackson any good now.

"Who got gunned?"

This was from Dusty, who arrived on the run and recognized his partner even in the darkness beyond the lighted hotel.

"Somebody," Danvers answered grimly, moving farther into the shadows, "reckoned Sam might of recognized them bandits, I reckon!"

"The murderin' hound!" Dusty gulped, went on more quietly: "Rick was in a hell of a sweat to be inside the stage before you got there, I recollect. He's responsible."

"Which is no help to Sam Jackson," Danvers said bitterly. "Nor to us. Damn it, I should of done something."

"Just what?" Dusty asked practically. "This is Rick's town, ain't it? Come on. We better get them hosses saddled."

This was not only hard sense, it jolted Danvers out of his mood. Dusty had not waited to saddle up because Dusty knew how dangerous it would be for either of them to be caught alone in that town after nightfall. Risky enough if they stuck together. It was time Slim began to use his head for something besides a hat-rack.

"Right," Slim Danvers agreed. "But I ain't leavin' town just yet."

Tersely, overriding Dusty's objections, he explained what he intended to attempt.

"Like as not you'll git yourself killed," Dusty said pessimistically. "But it's breath wasted to try talkin' sense to you."

Leaving the corral, they rode at a walk part of the way back to the hotel, and dismounted at the end of a hitch-rail in front of an abandoned store building.

"I'm tryin' the back way," Danvers said.

Dusty's final protest went unheeded. The tall cowboy hooked his spurs over the horn of his saddle and vanished as silently as a shadow into the darkness that packed in thickly alongside the empty store building. He went back to a littered yard, picked his way through rubbish and empty tin cans, vaulted a fence into an infrequently used alley. Five minutes later he stood near a leanto woodshed peering across a narrow stretch of yard toward the rear of the hotel building.

The hotel was a two-story frame building, built many years before by an early white settler. This man had had his own ideas of design and utility. The alley down which Danvers had made his way led on into an arroyo, some fifty yards east. This arroyo in

turn slanted back toward the ridge of low hills that formed the north wall of Skeleton Canyon. It afforded a screened retreat for anyone who desired to leave town hastily by the back door. The hotel builder apparently must have had this in mind when he provided his establishment with a narrow outside stairway that angled tipsily up the rear wall, looking as if it were about to collapse.

"Never saw no use for it till now," Danvers thought.

All was quiet back there. No windows showed light above the ground floor. Dishes clattered in the kitchen; a jumble of sounds drifted from the direction of the Miners' Bar. Danvers rubbed his nose with the heel of his hand, hitched at his belt, and glided toward the angling stairway.

It was a flimsy affair. It creaked under his weight, and once he thought the whole thing was about to go down. But somehow it held and he eased up, step by step, crowding close to the wall. A step broke under his foot and he barked his shin and cussed under his breath. The kitchen door opened, a dishpanful of water swished and splashed. The man who'd emptied the pan went back inside and slammed the door so hard the flimsy stairway quivered along its entire length.

"Should of fetched wings," muttered Danvers.

Then he went on up, gingerly as before, and at last reached the upper landing, where a small door shut him out from the hall that ran the depth of the building. The door was locked or jammed. He put his shoulder to it and the platform on which he stood groaned and sagged. Startled, he lunged against the door. It burst in with a splintering crash, pitching him to his hands and knees.

Desperately he clawed up, reaching for his guns. But nothing happened. For long seconds he crouched there, peering down the dimly lighted hall. At last, with a sigh of relief, he straightened.

Now he was confronted by another problem. Which room?

With another hitch at his belt, he started to find out. Keen ears were a help. Behind the first door that was outlined by lamplight in the room a man cussed. The heavy tramp of high-heeled boots sent him along to the third door. This, too, was outlined by the glow of lamplight behind it, but even with his ear against the widest crack he heard no sound inside the room. He rubbed his chin uncertainly, and right at that instant the door swung inward abruptly and the glare of a reflector lamp struck him in the eyes.

Before he could do more than blink, the end of a gun poked him hard, just above the belt buckle.

"You! What are you doing here?"

Even in his own amazement Danvers heard unmistakable dismay along with the astonishment in the girl's low-voiced exclamation. But the pressure of the gun did not lessen. Instead, another jab made him grunt. Then, firmly, he moved forward against the jabbing weapon.

The girl smothered a cry of protest, but she gave way before him. He entered the room closed the door and put his back against it.

"Howdy, ma'am," he said.

She watched him with a puzzling something in her eyes and no sign of fear.

"Why did you come here like this?" she demanded.

"Seemed the only way to see you," he said. "Seemed like I had to." A strange expression flicked across her lovely white face to check him as abruptly as a rope stops a footed steer.

And right then, so suddenly that he all but cried out, the real identity of this girl dawned upon him. He knew who she was! He knew why he had felt at first glance that haunting sense of familiarity. It was her picture—made years ago when she was only a little girl—that he had seen!

"You don't need to be afraid of me, Miss Ruth," he said gently.

"I'm not in the least afraid of you!"

The flash of her eyes and the quick tightening of her lips made it definite. The gun continued to point steadily at the third button of his shirt, too, but somehow he understood that she had not missed his use of her given name.

"You've got yourself into a jamb," he told her. "Comin' here the way you did, playin'—"

"You'd better get out of this room," she cut in. "I don't know what you're talking about. You've got no business here. Get out!"

"Yes'm," he nodded. "But first—"

Somehow then he closed the space between them, thrust the barrel of the gun toward the floor. It was a man-sized gun, but pointing at the floor it could do him no damage. He looked down soberly into the startled blue eyes that lifted towards his.

"Get out!" She backed away swiftly, jerked the gun up to cover him again. "I'm taking no chances with any man—not even you, Slim Danvers! Go before I shoot!"

It wasn't the threat that stopped him. It was the way she looked and spoke. Oh, she knew him all right. He reckoned she had recognized him even before he had recognized her, before she had heard his name. Suddenly he remembered how she had looked at him when he'd helped her down off the stage coach. It was plain enough that she'd known him then. How didn't matter. What did matter was why she had turned away from him and allowed Rick Blackwell to take charge.

"You're Ruth Hendry," he said quietly. "And Mark was one of my best friends."

She said nothing at all, just looked at him. It didn't make sense. She was the daughter Mark had been going to visit when he was killed on the desert road. For that murder young Jack Craig had been lynched.

Out in the hall, with sudden distinctness, a familiar voice spoke.

"Get it done. Report to me later."

Rick Blackwell's voice! Tension snapped down upon Slim Danvers. He heard Ruth gasp and knew that she too had recognized Blackwell's voice. But something else brought his attention sharply to focus upon her.

"He mustn't find you here!" she whispered tensely.

It was unbelievable. He stared at her, his mind momentarily blank. His throat felt as if a rope had jerked tightly about it. This girl—Mark's girl—Blackwell was coming along the hall!

"She's been expecting him!" he thought. "That's why she was in such a sweat to get rid of me! Expectin' him, an' I've been thinkin'—"

Abruptly he reached out, plucked the gun from the girl's hand. Then he was against the wall, flattened where the opening door would cover him.

Blackwell knocked. "It's Rick Blackwell, Miss Smith. May I come in?"

The girl did not reply. Watching her, Danvers witnessed a strange thing. At one moment she was staring at him in a kind of white-faced horror; the next, a flood of crimson swept her face, her eyes turned away from him. Then her head lifted and she stepped quickly toward the door.

Danvers' lips thinned against his teeth. He thrust the barrel of her gun under his belt, touched the grips of his own weapons.

"Don't, please!"

That was the merest whisper of sound. It, and the light touch of Ruth's hand on his arm, seemed to cast a spell on him. He stood there utterly rigid, holding his breath. Was this some trickery?

The door opened with him behind it. He could not see Blackwell, but he could see Ruth Hendry as she stood there, slim and tall and lovely, blocking the man's entrance.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Blackwell," she said crisply. "I don't receive men visitors in my room. Shall we go downstairs?"

Danvers never knew what Blackwell answered. This was trickery, right enough! Trickery that filled him with shame and delight.

The door closed. He heard the man and the girl walk away along the hall, down the stairs. He drew his hand down across his face and looked at it. It was wet.

"You're lower than a snake's belly, damn you!" he muttered. "She's Mark's gal! She's everything you knowed she'd be!"

Listening at the closed door, he heard voices down in the lobby. Then behind him, through the open window, there was a sudden rise of sound that turned him about, nerves springing taut. The rasp of an oath, a gruff command, the tramp of running feet alarmed him. Dusty was out there—and those sounds spelled trouble!

A quick look disclosed that the hall was empty. He slipped out of the room, delayed to toss Ruth's gun onto her bed, then closed the door quietly behind him.

The rickety stairway by which he had entered the hotel received his weight with groaning protests. He eased the door shut and stood squinting through the darkness. Out on the street there seemed to be a hunt in progress. The jumbled sounds that reached him held an ugly undertone. He licked his dry lips, tried to draw comfort from the thought that if Blackwell's men had found Dusty, he would now be hearing something quite different.

Suddenly a fierce yell arose. Instantly the street seemed to be alive with running, shouting, cursing men. Recklessly Danvers leaped down the rickety stairway.

At his first step the boom of a gunshot rolled through the town. Nor was it out on the street that the shot was fired. Danvers saw the flash below him, near the corner of the building. And right then rotted wood gave way beneath his foot.

His full weight plunged to the step below. With a splintering crash the entire stairway tore loose. Lunging desperately, he tried to fling himself clear. The breath jerked from his lungs. He hurtled through empty space, while another gunshot rocked the darkness.

IV

DODGING shapes milled below him. He came down on top of one of them. They hit the ground hard, but the tall cowboy was on top. He scrambled up, clawing for his guns. The man he'd landed on lurched up to his knees, went down again under a slashing blow from the long barrel of the cowboy's gun. And just then a pair of blurred forms came together not five feet from where Danvers stood.

"Hell!" rasped a familiar voice. "Have it, then!"

"Dusty!"

The taller of the two forms fell as Danvers leaped to lend a hand. Dim light glinted on the metal of Dusty's weapon. Then he was at Danvers like an irate terrier.

"Move them long legs! All hell's busted loose! They're out to git us!"

At a stumbling run the partners stampeded across the yard. Danvers wasn't surprised at Dusty's statement. It meant that Blackwell was about to make his final play. The timing tied in with the rest of the day's events. The motive lay behind the stage robbery, the theft of the mail sacks, the disappearance of the document he had expected. Ruth Hendry's presence on that particular stage might have been sheer coincidence, but the holdup was not.

"Travel!" snarled Dusty.

Men were running back into the hotel yard from the street. Blackwell's wolf pack was loose for the kill! And Ruth?

"Watch it!"

Instinctively they had headed for the arroyo, but now suddenly that way was closed. A small body of men charged down the alley. Danvers caught Dusty's arm.

"Back door! Hustle it, runt!"

"Plumb loco!" panted Dusty.

Maybe it was, but there was no time for argument. They wheeled and ran again, awkwardly on their high-heeled boots. Guns flared and boomed behind them. A bullet tore through Danvers' hat. Dusty cussed and flung an answering shot towards a moving mass in the darkness near the west corner of the hotel. Danvers fired twice to his left where more of the gang crowded back from the street. Then he drove his shoulder against the panel of the kitchen door.

The door burst inward. With Dusty at his heels the tall cowboy leaped across the threshold. The cook, a fat man in a greasy apron, rushed at them swinging a cleaver. The helper flung a steaming kettle at Dusty. Danvers turned the cleaver with the barrel of his gun and pitched the fat cook backward into the spindling helper. The two of them stumbled onto the stove which collapsed with a crash. The two cowboys went on into a short hall like a pair of scared bobcats.

The hall ran into the lobby opposite the front entrance. As Danvers ran into the lobby two men with guns in their hands charged in from the street. He slammed a shot high between them, splintering the wall above the door. The incoming pair leaped apart. The long barrel of Danvers' gun cracked down upon the head of one of them. Dusty's weapon cracked across the throat of the other one. Then the partners were out on the street, diving into the shadows and hunting the denser darkness beyond reach of the light that spilled out of the hotel. And hell broke loose behind them.

"Hosses!" grunted Danvers.

"This way!"

The little puncher took the lead. They found the two horses where he had moved them, off the street into the shell of an old adobe building where, fortunately, Blackwell's men had not thought to look.

"Huntin's all been on t'other side of the road," Dusty panted as they led the snorting ponies out of the enclosure. "Figgered one us had better use some brains."

Mounting at the rear of the old adobe, they heard the uproar that had centered around the hotel spread through the town.

"There they go!" yelled a harsh voice.

Instantly a volley of gunshots swept out of the darkness. The two horses leaped into a mad run. Bending low over the horns of their saddles, the partners tore away from there.

Tin cans skittered. The ponies jumped stiff legged over piles of rubbish. Danvers' buckskin stumbled, caught itself, raced on. A bullet burned across the tip of his shoulder. Another slug struck his right stirrup, numbed his foot. He heard Dusty swear. A ditch loomed suddenly. The buckskin jumped like a cat, landed with a jolt. They tore on.

And now Sidewinder dropped behind them. Brush studded hills rolled up ahead of them. They raced around a clump of manzanita and pulled down to a fast lope, riding crouched low knee to knee.

"Closer'n a Scotch miser," said Dusty. "But we turned the trick, tall feller. I bet ol' Snake-eye is bitin' hisself about now!"

The little puncher was characteristically elated. He loved trouble. A fight was a tonic. Danvers said nothing, but suddenly reined to a stop.

"This ain't far enough," Dusty protested. "Them coyotes will be on our trail soon as they git hosses. Didn't I tell you? The word's been passed to wipe us out."

The breathing of the two horses was loud in the stillness of the desert night. Behind them the shooting had ended, but even that was somehow ominous. Danvers winced as he explored the spot on his shoulder, but judged that the bullet which had touched him had done no serious damage. The numbness was going out of his foot, too. He pulled

it out of the stirrup and moved the ankle.

"Damaged any?" he asked.

"None to speak of," Dusty replied. And then: "We better keep movin'. Seems like Rick means business. Jack Peters tipped me off. Peters don't cotton much to ol' Snake-Eye, you know, spite of keeping his mouth shut mostly."

"He's got his job to think of," Danvers agreed.

They rode on slowly, angling toward the north. The night air was cool and soft. The muffled thud of the horses' hoofs and the occasional ripping sound of brush was the only sound nearby. Distantly a gunshot and a faint yell seemed to belong to another world.

"Peters allowed it was Spider Kling that finished Jackson," said Dusty. "Seems he opened the door to take a look at Jackson just when the shot was fired. Says he seen Kling duck outa sight. Likewise, Blackwell had just left the room, where he'd been ridin' close herd on Jackson up to then."

"Might be unhealthy for Peters," Danvers observed grimly, "if Kling spotted him."

"Which Jack knows," Dusty said. "Likewise, he knows somethin' else. He knows Jackson recognized one or two of them buzzards that robbed the stage. And he knows what they was after," the little puncher added meaningly.

Danvers pulled to a stop. "Howcome?"

"There was about two minutes when Peters was alone with Sam. Doc and Rick figgered Sam was plumb dead to the world, but he wasn't. He didn't talk much, but what he said was plenty! Them robbers was headed by Mose Bentley, and they was after a special delivery letter in a big envelop which they didn't get till they gunned Sam and took it off him."

Danvers said nothing. He knew what was coming.

"Seems that there letter," Dusty said tartly, "was addressed to some ornery offspring of a Scotch mule named Robert J. Danvers."

Danvers continued to say nothing. While a long moment passed he just sat there staring at the blurred shape of a mesquite bush. His surmises were correct. Here was proof, if he'd needed it, that Rick Blackwell would move swiftly and ruthlessly to salvage whatever he could before he left the country.

"He went to a heap of trouble to get that letter," Danvers said finally. "And my hunch was sure right. He knows the game is up. He knows—" He stopped abruptly, with a grunt, as if something had hit him.

"Now what's bitin' you?" Dusty demanded. "Don't you go off into no trance, blast you! What was in that letter? How'd that buzzard know it would be on the stage today? Damn if you ain't an aggravatin' son of a hoptoad! Start talkin'! But start ridin', too, if that crowbait ain't took root!"

But Danvers did not ride. He caught Dusty's pony by the bit even as it started.

"Hold it, runt!"

"Hold hell!" rasped Dusty. "Listen!"

There was no need for ear straining. From the direction of Sidewinder came the sound of gunfire. And nearer at hand the sudden rhythmic beat of shod hoofs told another tale. Horsemen, a considerable band of them, were pounding through the darkness. As well as if he'd been one of them, Slim Danvers knew the destination and the purpose of those riders. They were after him and Dusty, but they were after something else, too!

"It's begun!" he muttered. "They'll make a sweep of the range. They'll collect every head of stock between here and Twin Wells and be down through Skeleton Canyon before dawn!"

"Whilst we set here and enjoy the scenery!" rasped Dusty. "I might of knowed you'd catch up with all the talkin' you ain't never done—and do it at the wrong time!"

Danvers might have been deaf. He was torn by a conflict more powerful than anything he had ever experienced before. On the one hand was his duty to his own outfit and to his friends and neighbors; while on the other hand was Ruth Hendry!

He did not know the reason for Ruth's masquerade; he did not even know why she had found it necessary to come to Sidewinder. Moreover, she had made it plain that she wanted neither his advice nor his help at this time.

"But she don't know what she's up against," he thought. "And with Blackwell—"

"For Gawd's sake!" sputtered Dusty.

Danvers let loose his grip of his partner's bridle.

"Git goin'," he said curtly. "The letter that was stole would be from the Pinkerton man I hired to check up on Rick Blackwell. The report was due today, which was why I come in from the ranch. By this time Rick knows we've got the dope on his peddlin' of fake minin' stock and sellin' rustled stock. Him and his outfit will be plannin' one final cleanup before they pull their pickets."

"Hell!" Dusty wailed. "Will you—"

"Listen!" Danvers cut in. "That gal is Mark Hendry's daughter—and you saw what I did, runt! That's why I'm headin' back to town whilst you cut the breeze to beat them hellions to the Rafter T! Git goin'!"

Dusty took a deep breath as if to continue the argument. But they'd been partners a long time. The sternness with which Danvers spoke was full of meaning to the little man. Besides, Mark Hendry had been their friend, and friendship was more than a mere word.

"Mark's gal, eh?" Dusty's voice was husky. "And she's in one tough spot! Check, pardner! Good ridin'!"

He was gone, spurring his pony to a run that carried him out of sight in a matter of seconds. The rapid beat of the bay pony's hoofs blended with the steadier drumming of the other horses that were coming out from town. Danvers harkened for a moment, then nudged his buckskin with a spur.

When he reached high ground and looked toward town the yellow glare of fire lay against the sky, and he heard the distant, ominous sound of guns and shouting.

Uneasily he wondered what might have happened to the girl whose arrival had been so inopportune. Why had she come? She had never visited her father in all the years Danvers had known Mark Hendry. Once or twice, when liquor had loosened the old man's tongue, Mark had talked of his wife and daughter, and he'd carried a picture of the young girl in the back of his watch.

As Danvers remembered it, there had been a separation and finally a divorce. Mark had sent money for Ruth's education, but apparently he had not seen the girl since her childhood. The picture he carried was the picture of a girl of ten or twelve years with an intelligent, but otherwise undistinguished face.

"But she's growed up an' changed some since," Danvers thought. "Which is why I didn't recognize her right off. She's prettier, too. Old Mark would of been mighty proud of her."

As a matter of fact, he remembered that Mark had been proud of the girl, and sometimes he'd been moody over the circumstances that had robbed him of his home and his daughter. When a man grew old, he should have his family around him. Maybe that was the reason Mark had wanted to sell out and go back East to live so badly. Maybe—

Suddenly Danvers stood in his stirrups, pulling up so sharply that his pony sat on its tail.

"Mark's watch!" he muttered. "The skunk that gunned him took that along with the money!"

Savagely he drove spurs into the ribs of the snorting buckskin, lifted to a run.

V

SANITY returned quickly. Hardly had the buckskin settled down to it than Danvers realized the folly of stampeding back into Sidewinder like that. He tightened rein. "Take it easy, Buck!" he muttered. "We got us a job that'll take a deal of doin'!"

Riding at a lope, he cut across the trail of the raiders who were riding towards the Rafter T and circled the town. The reddish yellow glow of the fire deepened across the sky as he drew nearer. He heard the howling of the mob, the crash of breaking glass and splintering wood, sporadic gunshots. These were grim and ugly sounds that told him plainly that hell indeed had broken loose in Sidewinder that night.

His was normally a cool head; he might gamble for the fun of it, but when he fought it was with all the shrewdness and intelligence he possessed—to win. And never in his life had he more to win—or lose—than now. If he was to serve Ruth Hendry, he must keep out of Blackwell's hand; he must keep his freedom of action.

Riding cautiously into the lower end of the arroyo that led up behind the hotel, he calculated not the odds against him but the chances that Blackwell would have been too busy to molest the girl. And he reckoned, too, how long it would be until Dusty and the cowboys, who must first fight off the raiders, could reach town. He shook his head over that.

"Time they get here, it might be too late," he told himself. "Well, what's writ down in the book calls for a personal settlement between me and Rick. I've knowed that for a right smart spell."

A man stumbled out from behind a boulder, grabbed at the buckskin's head with one hand, threw up a gun with the other. A second man lurched from the shadows of the brush at the other side of the arroyo. The buckskin snorted, reared, lunged forward at the jab of Danvers' spurs. It plunged right over the man that grabbed at its head. First a shoulder and then a hoof thumped solidly. The outlaw yelled once and went down without firing a shot.

The second man, apparently half drunk, swayed to a stop, mouthed a curse and jerked up his gun. He went backward with Danvers' bullet in his chest. And then the cowboy and the buckskin were streaking on up the arroyo.

Would that one shot be heard above the racket in town? The fact that two men had been stationed there, obviously on the lookout, was proof that Blackwell, although he might have turned his gang free to loot the town, was taking no needless chances.

"Keepin' both front door and back open," the cowboy muttered. "Rick sure plays 'em close—and he ain't no fool!"

Around the first bend in the arroyo the buckskin fled, and then Danvers pulled to a stop. For a long moment he sat there, straining his eyes and his ears, planning his next move. Gradually, when he discovered no evidence that the shot had attracted attention, some of the tension went out of him. He rode on at a walk again, and dismounted at last almost directly below the hotel, where a slight overhang of the arroyo's wall and a stand of scrubby oaks made a convenient hiding place for the horse. On foot, then, as warily as a stalking cat, he climbed the steep bank.

Throughout the town pandemonium raged. The shrill screams and drunken laughter of dancehall women mingled with the raucous howls of rioting men. A sudden blast of gunshots rolled up. A new fire burst out with a roar of flames leaping high into the sky. Sparks showered over a wide area. The horrible scream of a horse in agony sent a shiver down Danvers' spine, made his stomach crawl.

"Burnin' the corral!" he muttered. "Hosses an' all! Gawd!"

A surge of anger steadied him, drove out the sickness. He'd heard it said that man is the most treacherous and merciless of all living creatures. Now he had proof of it.

"Damn them! Damn them!"

His own voice, repeating those words, aroused him. Grimly determined, he stepped out of the shadows beneath the tree.

The fact that the back door of the hotel was wide open made him shy away from it. Instead, he went along the alley, heading for Spuds Fenton's restaurant.

A howling mob packed the street near the burning haystacks and corral sheds. He saw a man break out of the mob and run toward the nearest of the burning sheds. This was a gangling man, hatless, clad in tattered overalls. Other men surrounded him. He fought them off, again broke into a run. And suddenly shots boomed and he pitched violently forward on his face.

Danvers found his own guns in his hands. But he thrust them back into leather, turned resolutely away. As he neared the one-story building where Spuds Fenton lived, cooked and fed his customers, three or four drunken men reeled from the building next to it. Until a few weeks ago this had housed the Desert Saloon, and apparently the departing proprietor had abandoned some of his liquid resources when he left. Danvers faded silently into a dark doorway.

The drunks lurched past without noticing him. He found the door of Fenton's place open, the place unlighted, apparently deserted. A chill washed over him. He peered fearfully into the darkness of the dining room.

"Spuds!" he called softly. "Spuds!"

There was no answer. He moved a little farther into the room. Somewhere something fell with a small rattling sound and a plop. He twisted his head for a glance behind him, saw nothing.

When he moved farther into the room he collided with an overturned table. Now he fumbled for a match, took a chance. The tiny flare leaped up. In the space of a few seconds he glimpsed a scene of havoc—smashed dishes, broken furniture, an overturned counter. And across the counter slumped a human form. The old roundup cook had a sawed-off shotgun in his hands, but he was dead.

"Got here too late, old-timer!" Danvers muttered. "Both of us here, it might of been different!"

He had hoped against hope to find Fenton unharmed. Apart from the help the old-timer assuredly would have given, Fenton could have told him things he wanted to know. Now indeed he must play a lone hand. Wheeling, he fumbled his way back to the street.

During these few minutes the fire at the corral had lost some of its fury. The haystacks were already burning low; the sheds made a less spectacular blaze. The mob was beginning to break up into smaller groups, renewing their looting of the ravaged town. One of these groups, consisting of a half-dozen men, lurched crazily down upon Danvers.

"Free drinksh thish way," hiccoughed one of them. "Lesh go!"

Danvers fell in with them. "Lesh go!"

They angled across the street in front of the hotel, and one of the drunks jerked a derisive thumb that way.

"Ricksh mishin' a heap o' fun account of a red-headed gal. Hell! Redheads is poison—me, I know. Married one, by Gawd!"

They whooped with drunken laughter. And as they whooped a gun exploded somewhere inside the hotel. An instant later a woman's scream ripped like a knife through the uproar.

Danvers wheeled. One of the gang grabbed at him, but he tore free, smacked his fist into the man's face. Avoiding another man who tried to block his way, he sprang up the hotel steps, charged into the lobby.

VI

THERE seemed to be no one on the ground floor of the hotel. Upstairs, however, he heard the swift patter of running feet, a choked cry, the sound of scuffling.

"Got you, baby!"

"Let me go!"

Hot blood pounded in Danvers' temples. He jumped for the stairs. But even as he moved another man spoke upstairs, in a harshly familiar voice.

"Fetch her back, Clip. She's a bit impulsive, but she'll learn!"

"Not from you!" cried Ruth. "And you keep your hands off me, you little rat!"

Danvers was going up the stairs. He was going up with long swift strides, but quietly, and he all but grinned at Clip Barlow's snarl. Ruth, he opined, had tagged the little cuss properly.

"Lemme gentle her, chief!" begged Clip.

"You fetch her back," replied Blackwell.

Something made Danvers halt suddenly, just before his head reached the level of the upper hall. It was something he did not attempt to reason out. He simply obeyed an impulse that was purely instinctive. Breathing a little too rapidly, he waited where he was while the two men forced the girl back into the room from which, apparently, she had tried to escape. And when Blackwell spoke again, his voice was less distinct but still clearly audible.

"Thought you'd fool me, did you?"

The closing of a door muffled the girl's reply and sent Danvers on up the stairs again. Peering ahead cautiously, he saw no one in the hall. And then, as once before that evening, he halted outside the closed door of Ruth Hendry's room.

The girl's voice came to him now, clear, crisp and scornful, betraying no hint of fear.

"My father's watch makes you his murderer! I should have known Slim Danvers would not be the killer you tried to make me believe him! But I wasn't really fooled—not as much as—"

"But *I* wasn't fooled at all, *querida mía,*" Blackwell broke in. "You see, your picture is in the watch. I didn't shoot the old gent, though. Clip, here attended to that and threw the blame very neatly on a worthless cowboy. I owe Danvers something, and I aim to collect!"

The last words were a sort of snarl. But the girl had more to say.

"So you wrote me a lying letter, naming him the murderer! But I didn't believe it, and I almost fooled you—"

"Wrong," Blackwell interrupted rudely. "You wasn't sure what to believe, so you figgered to play smart and find out. Only you played the fool instead. Well, I'm glad you showed up here, *querida!* You're a nice dish for a man to enjoy, below the Border where there's plenty of time for love!"

"Love!" cried Ruth scornfully. "You skunk!"

Blackwell laughed cruelly. "Tamin' you will be a pleasure. I only wish that Danvers—"

Danvers twisted the door-knob quietly. He went in fast.

"You pagin' me, Rick?"

Guns in his hands, he faced the two men and the startled, white-faced girl who whipped about at his entrance. And for about three seconds nothing happened. Ruth, standing near the foot of the bed, took one gasping breath and held it. Blackwell, who also had faced the door at Danvers' entrance, stood at about the middle of the room. His crudely handsome face betrayed momentary shock, but froze instantly into an unreadable mask. His black eyes seemed to glow.

But there was a joker in the hand—Clip Barlow. Danvers saw that instantly, but there was nothing he could do about it. He'd had to take this chance; otherwise the odds might have been much greater. But the spidery gunman held a key spot in the setup. He

was almost behind Ruth, halfway along the length of the bed, with the open window at his right. And he betrayed no surprise whatever.

"You got a mighty bad habit, Danvers," he said. "You keep stickin' your nose in where it don't belong. And this time—"

The abrupt dip and turn of his spidery body ended the moment. He went forward around the end of the bed. His left arm hooked around Ruth's waist, and his right hand gun blazed at Danvers, all in one split second of time.

The bullet passed between Danvers' arm and his body, smacked into the wall behind him. Before the renegade gunman could fire again he was upset by the writhing wrench of the girl's long-limbed young body. That wrench broke Barlow's hold, sent him stumbling to his knees. The girl sprang clear of him.

Danvers, watching Rick Blackwell like a hawk, saw part but not all of this. For at Barlow's first motion, Rick went for his guns. They came out of his armpits spitting lead. And the man himself leaped back and to the side like a startled cat. Danvers' bullet missed him by inches, so swift was that sideward leap. And the cowboy squatted as he fired, and fired again from his haunches. The searing touch of lead flung him hard against the wall. He saw Barlow, down on one knee, grow rigid as he took deliberate aim.

But the first bullet had barely touched Danvers, even though it had flung him off balance. In the instant while Barlow drew that careful bead and crooked his finger, the tall cowboy rose up in a toadlike hop. The gunman's shot sliced over his hip. His own lead took the spidery hombre just below the throat.

But again that split second had given Rick Blackwell a break. He caught the stumbling Ruth, swung her in between himself and the guns Danvers jerked toward him.

"Now!" he snarled. "This ends it, damn you!"

His right-hand gun spurted flame and lead. But even as he pulled the trigger Ruth again proved her Western heritage. She drove back against him with all her weight. The top of her head cracked against his jutting chin. The bullet that was meant to finish Danvers went over the cowboy's head.

And Danvers, with one long leap, snatched the girl out of the killer's relaxed grasp and laid the long barrel of his gun solidly upon Blackwell's skull. Rick fell like a creased steer. Ruth, abruptly released, toppled into Danvers' arms.

"Ruth!" he muttered, holding her. "You ain't hurt? Tell me!"

"Slim!" she sobbed. "Oh, Slim, I was afraid they'd kill you!"

For a few mad seconds they clung to each other in that room of death where gun smoke swirled. But an urgency beat upon Danvers, even in that moment of ecstasy. They were not yet out of danger. Sidewinder was in the hands of the mob that howled and stormed along its single street.

"Sweet!" he murmured. "Our life's all ahead!"

So he steadied her on her feet, wheeled and stalked to the open window. A handful of men were out in the street, staring up at the hotel, obviously discussing what they must have heard even above that outer din. But the fact that those men hesitated about rushing inside the hotel was significant. To Danvers it meant that Blackwell had given strict orders that he was not to be interrupted.

"But them buzzards are gettin' mighty curious," the tall cowboy thought. "Yeah, there it comes!"

For one of the debating group suddenly left the others and started toward the hotel entrance. Danvers turned swiftly.

Ruth was watching him from where she stood near the door into the hall. If he lived two lifetimes he would never forget the look she gave him, her crooked little smile of courage and trust. Or the fact that she had armed

herself with one of Rick Blackwell's guns.

"More trouble?" she asked.

"We better move," he said simply. "Here."

He jerked the cartridge belt from Clip Barlow's lifeless body, handed it to her. She whitened, but she took the belt and hooked it over her slender waist. And while she did this the cowboy, with one ear tuned for sound in the creaky, Stygian hall, took a look at Blackwell.

"Hey, Clip! You need any help?"

The yell came up the stairs from the lobby. Danvers straightened, and took a chance. Imitating Barlow's snarling voice as best he could, he replied:

"Told you to keep your noses outa this, didn't I?"

"But we heard—"

"But hell!" Danvers snarled, and slammed the door.

Would it work? He grinned thinly at Ruth, thrilled at her answering smile. And he had a hunch that his bluff would turn the trick, for a while.

He was right. The man at the foot of the stairs grumbled profanely, but he did not come up to investigate. A quick glance out the window showed him rejoining his companions in the street. The whole group paused, then moved away.

"It's amazin' what a man can git away with in a pinch," Danvers said to Ruth. "But we better not strain our luck too much. Rip a sheet, will you?"

She asked no questions, but while they bound and gagged the unconscious Blackwell he told her what was on his mind. The one job done to his satisfaction, he rolled Clip Barlow's lifeless body beneath the bed, made sure that it would not be seen by anyone who glanced into the room, and collected loose guns and other evidences of the struggle. Then, having restored the room's normal appearance, he slung Blackwell's limp form over his shoulder and led the way out of the room of horror.

A trap door through the hall ceiling opened onto the flat roof of the building, which could be reached by means of a short ladder. Between them they managed to get their prisoner through the opening. Danvers pulled the ladder up behind them and closed the trap door.

It's a gamble," he told the girl, "but I feel lucky. Anyhow, we wouldn't get far without hosses—and we'd be in a mess of trouble if we was spotted down below. This way, mebbe any of them hombres that takes a look will figger Rick and Clip have took you and headed south."

Ruth shivered a little as she nodded. He pulled Blackwell up against the chimney, and went to the edge of the roof for a look down into the street. The girl came to stand beside him there.

"No matter what happens now," she said softly, "I'm glad. Dad thought so much of you. I couldn't believe you'd kill him for—for money."

Her nearness was sweeter than anything he had ever known or dreamed. He looked at her and tried to answer her but could not. And then somehow his arms were around her, and her arms were holding him.

"At sunrise Dusty will be here with help," he murmured. "But there's somethin' more important than that, Ruth. I'll see how much lovelier you are!"

She pulled his head down and he found her lips, and time and place and circumstances lost all meaning. The only reality was there, strong and sure, in his arms.

The night passed, a night full of alarms. Toward morning the rioting ceased and then the rabble began to depart, taking with them everything of value they could carry, leaving behind them the shambles of a helltown that was dead. And sunrise found Slim Danvers and Ruth and their prisoner still undetected when the cowboys, headed by Dusty, came loping into the deserted street, their hoofbeats echoing from gaunt, shadow-filled buildings.

The Music of Spurs

Anxiously, hopefully, Marjory listened for the music of a certain pair of spurs . . . for their presence could make a cloudy day cheerful and turn hard work to gaiety.

By Stephen Payne

WHEN Marjory saw the notice, "Wanted ranch cooks. Fifty dollars a month, board and room," she fibbed a little bit to the employment agency. To young and pretty Marjory ranches were enchanting places where life was free and easy, and good-looking bronzed cowboys played guitars and sang songs to the ladies. She would ride horseback over dim trails winding back into green mountains where lakes and rivers welcomed her and the high, jagged, snowy peaks smiled down at one.

She didn't know exactly what else she'd do, and nothing at all about what the working crew behind the scenes, particularly the cook, was supposed to do. And certainly Marjory Randle's own brief experience as a guest on a dude ranch before she had been compelled to earn her own living had not disillusioned her.

Henry Walker, the rancher who hired her with quite evident misgivings, proved disappointing. Rough-hewn, stolid and a bit unkempt, he was far from Marjory's ideal. The ranch house too was disappointing, to state it mildly, and so was the ten-man hay crew. Nor did she like the pack-rat which came nightly to the house and made as much noise as if two young boys were scuffling and stamping on the floor.

The setting, however, was marvelous. Looking eastward from the ranch house door, Marjory could see the wide

green meadow stretching away to meet pine-covered foothills; beautiful foothills hemming in this great valley on three sides, while farther back and beyond them, mountains lifted their massive shoulders into the blue sky. The low log buildings, gray and weathered and hugging the soil as if minded to sink into it, were set in a pasture below the meadow proper. Directly north of them a willow-lined river chuckled and sang all the day long.

This part of her new life Marjory loved very dearly. But as cook for a hay crew Marjory learned she had no time for dreams; no time for horseback rides even if the boss had permitted her to use a saddle horse. And the work! From her very first meal it had Marjory down. Even such a simple thing as a potato she could not cook properly. Here in this high altitude they took twice as long to boil as she had been accustomed to. Beans? She hated them after her first attempt when the men passed them up grunting, "Plumb raw."

Bread proved an even greater trial. Marjory knew nothing of the mysteries of its production. Nor had she ever vaguely imagined the quantity of food a working man could eat. At first, Henry Walker patiently suggested at each meal, "Rip open some tin cans and bring more crackers." Canned sweet potatoes, beans, peas, tomatoes, corn—the men seemed to hate them all, and how the huge wooden box of crackers went down.

On the morning of the third day Henry Walker waited until after his crew had trouped wordlessly from the big kitchen dining-room and then talked to Marjory Randle.

He liked her personally. He himself could put up with the way she was a-doin', but the men was grouching 'bout the grub. You had to feed a hay crew all proper to keep 'em satisfied and get the work out of 'em.

Miss Randle could understand he just had to get his hay crop stacked; each day was costing him a heap of money, and if the men quit on him he never would get through. Another thing, a ranch cook was expected to make butter and Marjory'd better churn right off quick. He hadn't said nothing about it till now, waiting for her to take a-hold without bein' told, but there was a heap of laundry to be done, bunkhouse towels in particular.

Dismayed by the tremendous amount of work she was supposed to do, Marjory said in a small voice she tried to keep steady, "I'll do the best I can, Mr. Walker."

After the men with their teams had gone to the field, after the ranch had become silent save only for tinkle of a cow bell and the clucking of chickens in the yard, Marjory gathered up the towels and her employer's soiled clothes. She'd wash, she'd make light bread, she'd get a real dinner because she couldn't lose this job!

First, however, she'd make butter. Two hours later she glanced anxiously at the kitchen clock. Nine-thirty. Dinner must be on the table at twelve-fifteen. The breakfast dishes were still unwashed; the fire in the warped old wood-burning range was out again. It was always pulling that mean, sneaking trick. Marjory couldn't remember about forever and ever poking wood into it. The reservoir and the tea kettle were probably dry. Henry Walker did carry in firewood, but always he forgot the water which must be brought from the river in pails. And the white cream inside the churn was still defying her.

Jingle, jingle, jingle!

This alien, musical sound came from the dense willows along the river north of the house. Marjory looked around a bit wildly. The kitchen was a mess, and visitors always came to the kitchen door. She herself was a mess, hair tumbled around her forehead and ears, her face red and damp with perspiration, her dress spotted and torn, a couple of hot grease burns on her right forearm. But already a man was at the wide-open door.

OOD morning!" Marjory looked into a pair of the largest and most cheerful brown eyes she had ever seen. They were set under dark brows in a mahogany-brown face that was young and carefree. His big shoulders stretched a tan shirt, and below his lean waistline blue overalls snuggled into short-topped black boots. These plain boots ornamented by silver-mounted spurs were the source of the jingle-jingle music. Pulling off a huge white hat decorated with a braided hair band, he displayed a well shaped head with closely cut black hair. Altogether this stranger took Marjory's breath away.

She stammered, "Why, good morning, cowboy."

"That's right, but call me Chet." He showed nice teeth in a friendly smile. His twinkling brown eyes roamed around the untidy kitchen.

Marjory said, "I'm—I'm the cook, Marjory Randle."

"Marjory? Name suits you. I like it."

He seemed to have a habit of quick speech. His spurs jingled as he stepped into the room. "Now we're acquainted, can I give you a hand?"

"Give me back my own hand, cowboy!" And Marjory, who three minutes earlier had thought she'd never again smile, laughed softly, "What did you mean exactly?"

"Give you a lift with your morning chores?"

"Oh! But I couldn't ask—"

Quickness with this man lay not alone in manner of speech. He had snatched the water buckets and turned out of the house before she could finish. Wondering if she were dreaming, Marjory sprang to the door.

Gazing up the long meadow, she saw that a haystack, started that morning, was now taking shape. Other stacks had sprung up like mushrooms these past two days. She could make out the shapes of teams moving up there, could faintly hear the *hum-hum* of mowing machines. Strangely and suddenly it came to her that there was romance about this great work of harvesting hay, a certain glamor of which she had not thought until this stranger had come jingling into her life.

Returning from the river, he brushed past her to set down the pails, and then stepped over to the cold stove. Making a wood fire had Marjory bested. But in no time at all this cowboy had one roaring up the chimney. Marjory watched him fill the kettle and the reservoir. When he had brought more water, she said:

"I—I got a little behind making butter."

"How's it coming?" He opened the barrel churn, poked a finger into the cream and held it there.

"That's the trouble," said Marjory. "It isn't coming at all."

"We'll fix that." He jingled into the big storeroom and came out with a pan of milk which he dumped into the churn. "Little girl, you've bruised your hands on that crank. Suppose you sort of round up the dishes."

Swish, chud, swish! The cowboy was turning the churn. Marjory went to work on the dishes.

"Where do you live, Chet?"

"Keep a secret?"

"Is where you live a secret?"

"No-o. But old Henry Walker mustn't catch me on his ranch."

"Oh! Why not? . . . Have you got butter already?"

"Yes, Bright Eyes. Just cooled that cream a trifle, and out popped the butter."

"That's wonderful. Now what do we do with it?"

"You don't know?"

"I never made butter in my life. I never cooked either, except for two or three, and not much then, until—"

"Until you tackled this job? Marjory, you've got plenty sand. . . . Put some wood in the stove and bring me the salt."

Marjory said saucily, "I ought to be

the boss in my kitchen, not you. You're a cowboy, aren't you?"

"One of a vanishing race. A holdout."

"A holdout?"

"Still holding out against doing farm work, and so far managing to get by. . . . Henry Walker hates me."

"Yet you dared to come on his ranch! Why?" Marjory hoped he would say that he had seen her and come to get acquainted.

His answer dumbfounded her. "Walker accused me of being a thief. Before that we used to be almost chummy. But now—" he shrugged, resumed, "The butter's all washed and salted and rolled into a ball. What about dinner?"

Marjory hardly heard this in the drumming echo of his words: "Walker accused me of being a thief."

The cowboy had gone into the storeroom, but was out again in a minute with the big roast of beef Henry Walker had cut this morning. She watched him select a pan, season the roast and slide it into oven. He certainly knew exactly what he was about when it came to cooking. She saw his distasteful grimace at dirty clothes and towels piled in one corner.

"A Chinaman's job!" he remarked. "But it's supposed to be part of the cook's work, Marjory."

"Is it Chet? You see, I thought this ranch cooking would be for just two or three men. I could manage that."

He was peeling dry onions. "You can manage, quick as you get the hang of it. We'll boil the onions, bake spuds with the beef. I aim to see you do make good, partner."

"Where'd you come from anyway? How'd you know I wasn't making good?"

"Tch! Tch! I'm a mysterious character. Pop up where least expected and — You must promise not to tell Henry about me or— or I'll have to leave."

"Oh, don't or I'll lose my job. There's no bread for dinner, and as for my biscuits—I overheard the men talking about 'slugs' and 'cement' and 'bullets.' No dessert, and Mr. Walker wants dessert for dinner and supper."

"Then we'll please Mr. Walker," promised Chet.

The balance of that morning passed like a dream from which Marjory feared to awaken. It was twelve o'clock before Chet started the biscuits—such a great lot of them. When he had them in the pans he hauled the roast out of the oven saying:

"There you are. Biscuits take just five minutes in that oven. Now I've got to fade away."

"But you can't get to the willows without being seen," Marjory pointed out, alarmed.

LREADY the Walker hay crew was in the very dooryard. Men and teams, some fellows riding one horse of a team bareback; others bunched in a rattling wagon, with teams led alongside and behind it.

Marjory knew that upon their arrival the men would first care for the horses. After this the younger fellows would race pell-mell to the bunkhouse to wash, the older fellows being a bit more leisurely. But young and middle-aged and old alike certainly would make short work of dousing hands and faces and getting feet under the table.

Chet was answering, "I'll hide in the storeroom." He took off his spurs.

"No!" cried Marjory. "Mr. Walker always goes there and prowls. Probably to see how much food I've used."

"The living room?"

"His desk's there and often he makes out his accounts or something right after dinner. But he moved his bedding to the hay mow when I came, so I have the house to myself."

"Then I'll be safe in your room!" said Chet, closing the door behind him.

A brief moment later Marjory heard some of the men clumping around the corner of the house. One was muttering, "If we get another dose of half-raw beans, beef dipped in hot water and

took out again, and sinkers you can't drive a nail into, I'm sure a-goin' down the road."

"Me too, Bill."

But today Marjory Randle was triumphant. The men of Walker's hay crew did not talk, but their eyes followed the girl cook as she moved lightly about the table refilling coffee cups and milk glasses. Two great platters of smoking hot biscuits disappeared like frost touched by fire. Marjory had two other pans right from the oven to replace them.

"Miss Randle," declared the rancher after his men had gone, "that's somethin' like it. Fact, that's the best darned meal I ever wrapped a lip around. But," with a frown, "I can't see why you were holdin' out on me."

By feeding wood to the stove Marjory hid the strange expression on her face. Nice to receive praise when so far there had been nothing but censure. But—

When the hay crew had returned to the field, Chet Masters again took up his self-appointed task, and never had Marjory known an afternoon to pass so swiftly or so pleasantly. Never had she met such a light-hearted, entertaining chap as this jaunty cowboy. With Chet helping, the work was fun.

The young man mixed a great batch of yeast bread dough, and set it behind the stove to rise. Finally he attacked the laundry chore. "Sort of goes against the grain for me to scrub Henry Walker's duds," he remarked. "But you'd have to do it if I didn't."

Marjory hung out the clothes and the towels. She fed the chickens and gathered the eggs, and by then the afternoon shadows were lengthening and it was time to start supper.

Chet helped her get everything under way before he said, "Time I was driftin'."

He stooped to put on his spurs, and when he had straightened, the two young people stood looking at each other with sudden constraint and embarrassment.

"Chet, this has been wonderful. But" Marjory averted her gaze and felt herself flushing, "I'm afraid of tomorrow."

He smiled and caught her hand and squeezed it. "If it's O.K. with you I'll be back."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

His spurs were jingling their tune as he walked rapidly to the willows and vanished. Marjory, looking after him starry-eyed, soon heard the sound of a horse splashing across the river and then caught a glimpse of the rider and his mount as they topped out on the pine-clad hill beyond the willow-lined stream.

Supper repeated the great success of dinner. Afterward, while Marjory was washing the dishes, the stolid ranch owner clumped into her kitchen, bearing two huge pails of milk. When he had strained the milk and taken the pans to the shelves in the cool storeroom, he faced the girl cook.

Marjory drew back half frightened, contrasting this big, hard-working, serious fellow with quick, care-free, cheerful Chet Masters. Except that his calloused hands crumpled his slouch hat he showed no particular emotion as he said, "First off I figured you wouldn't do a-tall, Miss Randle. Sorta pretty and like a flower, easy hurt and crushed, I figured. Not husky and strong-built like ranchers' wives oughter be. Fooled me, you did," grinning. "Little, but wiry and tough. You sure can turn off the work."

Marjory was feeling more and more panicky. Color flooded her cheeks and her eyes were veiled beneath lowered lashes.

"Them clothes. I looked at 'em. Cleaner'n they ever was when I done 'em myself. And how you can cook!"

No sound escaped Marjory's tight lips. If her life had depended upon it she could not have met the man's steady eyes. After a moment he muttered, "Needn't be so confused-like 'bout it. . . . Well, g-night."

MARJORY thought she wouldn't sleep well, but she did, and for the first time she awoke gayly light of heart, not dreading the forthcoming day's ordeal. Though the cook was supposed to roll out at half-past four, light her fire, and carry her water from the river, Marjory didn't mind. Chet was coming again today!

At breakfast the men, although they said nothing in her hearing, looked both annoyed and puzzled. Henry Walker lingered outside the door until they were gone. Marjory, fearing the worst, had braced herself when something distracted him and, following the direction of his intent gaze, the girl saw a dozen cattle in his meadow.

"Some of that darned Flying H outfit's dogies in my field again," he burst out. "Why don't that scalawag range rider take care of 'em?"

"Scalawag range rider?" asked Marjory, pushing a stray lock of shining dark hair back into place.

"A fellow name of Chet Masters. Still working for the Flying H, old man Hungerford's ranch down country a piece, even though I told Hungerford to fire him."

Marjory asked a natural question, "Why should Hungerford fire him?"

"Chet's a damn thief! That's why. I couldn't prove my case, but I told him plain to keep plumb off the O T L."

Marjory thought, "I'll have to have it proved to me before I'll believe Chet's a thief!"

When all of the crew were gone, she stacked the dishes, listening for the jingle of spurs. She fed the chickens and looked toward the willows. She washed the dishes, always listening, going outside often to look. Eight o'clock. Nine. Still no jingle.

She must start dinner. What would she have? What about that bread dough swelling in its pan? Chet would fix it when he came. Surely Chet would come soon. Ten o'clock! Marjory grew panicky and then angry. He'd told her he would come. She wadded the bread dough into pans and put it in the oven to bake. At eleven, anger gave place to despair.

Joyfully the men of Walker's big crew seated themselves for dinner. Such a dinner! Abruptly the laughter and the joking stopped. Henry Walker turned toward his cook an incredulous, baffled face. "I don't get this, Miss Randle."

"Sometimes," said Marjory, trying to keep her lower lip from trembling, "things go wrong."

"Sure they do," agreed the rancher. "Just open some cans of beans and sweet 'taters and bring out some crackers. Yep, crackers. The bread is kinder burnt on both edges, raw in the middle. You'll be back in your stride come suppertime."

But although a silent, unhappy Marjory did the best she knew how, the supper was no great improvement. Later, when Henry Walker again brought in the milk, he paused and watched Marjory washing and wiping the dishes.

He cleared his throat twice before he blurted: "Miss Randle, I figure you ought to explain this to me."

"There's nothing to explain, Mr. Walker." She hated Chet Masters, wished he'd never come into her life. His two wonderful meals had temporarily saved for her her job, but they had now placed her in the most embarrassing and humiliating position imaginable.

Walker persisted, "Can it be like some of the boys is saying?"

"What are they saying?"

"Well one of 'em put it thisaway, "That girl's plain ornery. She's showed us she can dish up swell chuck. But she won't!"

"Plain ornery!" Marjory wanted to fly from the ranch and never come back. But she had no place to go, and her fear that she would lose this job—the only job she had had for five heartbreaking months—was great. She held

herself steady to answer quietly, "I'll do better, Mr. Walker."

"Bully! Your best is good enough for anybody!"

Possibly because her nerves were ragged, Marjory felt like screaming when her nocturnal visitor, the pack-rat, awakened her during the night. Why did she always forget to remind Henry Walker to set a trap for the pest? Her hands shaking, she seized her flashlight and hurried to the pantry. Here, her flash picked out the rat. In its mouth was a dried apricot. Its beady eyes stared impudently at the young woman.

"Go away," she cried, advancing upon her enemy, which scampered through a small hole in the log wall.

Marjory plugged the hole with a piece of rag and went back to bed. Tomorrow she'd try to find the rat's nest and exterminate the loathsome creature. Perhaps Chet would help! But no. The cheerful cowboy had let her down. He wasn't coming back.

Another day, cloudless, serene, perfect as to weather; dismal, heart-breaking to Marjory Randle. No jingle of spurs; no brisk, smiling Chet Masters. At the noon meal the hay crew was sullen, almost in open revolt. The way Henry Walker acted and the way he looked would have been screamingly funny to an outsider understanding the situation.

Marjory found no humor in any part of this situation. The meal over, her boss halted and stammered, "You've got me in a hell of a fix. The men, they are a-going to walk out on me tonight unless they get some grub they like."

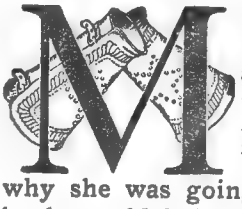
"I'm—I'm sorry." How weak that sounded! Yet Marjory felt deep sympathy for the ranchman with the big job on his hands. She had failed him as Chet Masters had failed her.

"You're sorry!" Rage crowded his voice, turned his rugged, stubbled face dark. "Miss Randle, if only you'll come through like you did the other day, everything'll be hunky-dory again. Won't you? Please?"

Marjory didn't answer. And suddenly Walker's belligerence changed to dismay. "Uh," he muttered helplessly, "you're a-going to cry." He shuffled to the door, paused and swept his long meadow with a searching glance.

"Doggone! Twenty-thirty of them Flying H cattle in my field! I'll fog 'em out myself. Then I'll lope over to Chet Masters' camp on the Blue Fork and beat him up good and plenty! Seems like he's plain no good."

"But how he can cook!" thought Marjory.



MECHANICALLY she went about her afternoon work. Two hours had passed before she began to wonder why she was going on. A good cook book would help. But there was none on the ranch, and it was just no use! Tonight Henry Walker would find himself with no hay crew and Marjory Randle would find herself without a job, an ignominious failure!

All at once she remembered her resolve to hunt for her enemy, the pack-rat. Perhaps it made its headquarters in the old woodshed, a building no longer in use. Armed with a three-foot stick, Marjory entered this tumble-down structure, a dusty and musty place half filled with junk. In a far corner on an outstanding shelf she saw a great heap of sticks and twigs.

Marjory thrust her weapon into the pile and at once her enemy appeared. She sprang backward startled, for it seemed to her that the rat's white whiskers twitched with rage and its beady eyes held venom. A moment later, however, the rat fled along a rafter and darted through a hole.

"Darn," said Marjory with emphasis. "At least I'll give you something to do beside annoy me at night. I'll tear your lovely home to pieces and rebuilding it will keep you busy." Vigorously she prodded the nest, tumbling its chips and trash to the ground.

Jingle, jingle, jingle! Marjory's heart turned over, stopped, then raced wildly. Chet was coming! Before she knew what she intended to do or was actually doing, her feet carried her outside.

A vigilant magpie squawked and flew away as Chet came out of the willows. His hat was jaunty as ever, but his step was not the light, quick one Marjory had known. He was limping, his left foot bound up in a gunnysack. The jingle sounded only from the spur on his right foot.

Nevertheless Marjory suddenly resolved to look straight through him and cut him dead. As he drew nearer she noted his face was a bit haggard, his merry eyes bloodshot.

"Another fine day, Marjory," removing his white Stetson.

"Is it?"

"Great weather for putting up hay. From the new stacks I see old Henry's making the fur fly."

"He won't after today. His crew'll walk out tonight."

Chet arched one eyebrow, put on his hat and started to roll a smoke. "I was mistaken about the weather, Marjory. Any mittens and ear muffs I could borrow?"

"What do you want with ear muffs and mittens?"

"I hadn't noticed the wintry blasts till I got right close to you, Miss Randle."

Marjory started to laugh and checked the impulse. She wasn't forgiving him or making up with him. Never! "I've work to do and you're not exactly welcome."

Color ran up his neck and flooded his face. She'd hurt him and she was glad. Or was she? She knew in her own heart that she did not want him to go away. She was so friendless, so alone.

"Excuses are poor things," he said slowly. "And I'm such a kidder you wouldn't believe me if I started making 'em."

"A kidder? I suppose that accounts for your coming here the other day?"

"Not exactly. I'd seen you from yonder ridge over there beyond the willows. Field-glasses gave a close-up of a mighty nifty girl I right away liked so much I decided to steal her."

"Oh! And to impress the girl favorably you gave her a big lift one day only to let her down hard the next?"

"A little something prevented stealing you that first day, Marjory. A sort of unwritten code which keeps you from leaving a man in the lurch. Walker had a big job to be done. He was banking on you. Until his hay's in the stack I can't go through with my plan."

There was ice in Marjory's voice. "As if, after what you've done, or rather what you didn't do, there's any hope of your carrying out such a plan!"

Chet looked at his bandaged foot. "How lonely and empty a range can be when you need help," he remarked.

"Or a ranch!"

Sympathy came into his eyes, sleep-hungry and bloodshot; concern filled his voice. "You haven't been having it so happy?"

Abruptly Marjory turned her back on the cowboy, her shoulders beginning to shake. "I can't give the men meals like—like you gave them. I'm—I'm learning but I can't learn fast enough." Her head came up, she dashed the tears from her lashes. "But what do you care?"

Chet had limped to her side. His hand was on her arm. Henry Walker had appeared from the jungle of brush, riding straight to girl and cowboy.

"What's all this?" he demanded curtly.

Marjory, scared, apprehensive, waited for Chet to answer her boss. She saw the man's stormy eyes run down the cowboy's figure and focus upon his bandaged foot.

"Chet Masters, are you hurt bad?" he asked. "Just now I rode to your range camp aimin' to take you apart. But on the way magpies and crows led me to a dead horse in a prospect hole. I recognized old Sundown of the Flying H spread. One of your string, cowboy."

"Yes?" Chet's arm moved to encompass the girl's shoulders protectingly, possessively. "You read something maybe from the sign and tracks?"

"I sure did. The horse had carried his rider into that darned hole and pinned his legs against the sides of it. The rider'd been there a long, long time, digging at the rocky wall with a jack knife. He'd dug himself loose at last and, like he was all in, hopped and crawled to your camp on the Blue Fork."

Marjory drew in her breath, looked up into Chet's face. "Chet, did—did this happen yesterday?"

The old familiar, mischievous grin lighted his eyes. "I sort of lost track of time, Marjory. But it was nothing. A little accident that might happen to any cowhand riding alone."

"Nothing! When you might have died there all alone!"

Walker said, "Well, before I got to his camp that cowboy had caught up another horse. I tracked him straight to this ranch . . . Chet Masters, howcome you're acquainted with my cook?"

"Oh, Chet," Marjory whispered, "now I understand. Let me answer him . . . Mr. Walker, those two wonderful meals—Chet cooked them."

If it hadn't been so terribly serious, she would have laughed at Walker's amazement. Laughed at the swiftly changing expression on his stolid, weather-beaten face. "Not you, but Chet cooked 'em? Uh? I might have suspected. There was somethin' terrible familiar about them biscuits."

"Of course," drawled Chet. "Not so long ago I used to drop in on you every once in a while and cook a square meal for you, Henry."

"So you did," snapped Walker, his manner reminding Marjory of the bristling of a dog about to engage in a fight. "But that was before you turned thief and—"

Marjory stepped in front of Chet defensively. "Mr. Walker, what is it you believe Chet stole from you?"

"A bunch of bills I had stuck up on a shelf in my kitchen. Amounted to a couple hundred dollars. And by jingo, at the time when I missed 'em, nobody only Chet Masters had been on the ranch. So—"

Chet broke in, "I never even saw your little wad, Henry. Now slide out of your saddle and I'll make you swallow that dirty—"

"Steady, Chet," cried Marjory, her eyes sparkling. "And you, Mr. Walker stop doubling your fists and glowering. No fighting, no more talking until I've shown something to both of you."

Her hand on Chet's arm she led him into the woodshed, Walker following. "There," Marjory pointed to the much disrupted rat's nest. "Do you both see what I see? A sheaf of bills!"

Henry Walker projected himself forward. His hand reached up, grasped the small bunch of greenbacks. He shook the dust from them and both hands trembled as he combed through them. Marjory enjoyed his confusion as he looked into Chet's eyes; eyes which had been so stern only a minute ago, but were now twinkling.

"All here, cowboy," stammered the rancher. "I—I don't know how to say it, b-but it's plain that damned rat was to blame and—and I'm swallowing what I said. Chet, if you'll give me a good swift kick, I'll feel better, too."

Chet was chuckling softly. "Sorry, old man, but my foot's banged up, or I'd oblige. Seems to me we both ought to thank Miss Randle."

"You know it! Let's bury—"

"The hatchet," chuckled Chet. "Henry, lope up the field to join your crew. When they come in for supper tonight they'll find a meal to make 'em forget they ever wanted to quit your outfit."

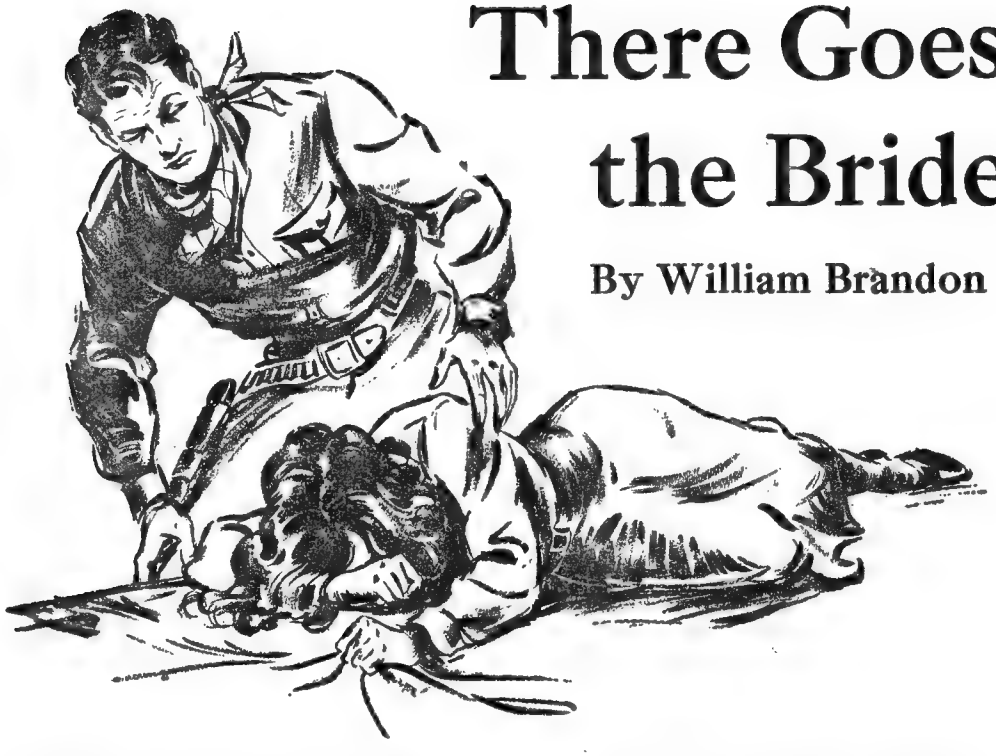
The rancher beamed. "You'll save the day for me, Chet?"

"If Marjory's agreeable I'll ride over here every day to give her a hand until your hay's put up. O. K., Marjory?"

"O. K., Chet," said the girl, almost singing the words, and her hand tightened on his arm.

There Goes the Bride

By William Brandon



When Jimmy came home and told his pard he'd met a girl and married her all in the very same day, Shorty knew they were in for plenty trouble.

THE COLT .44 caliber Peacemaker is a big gun. It makes a hell of a noise and does a lot of damage. It's as convincing as any argument a man can fill his hand with.

When Jimmy Sears rode back to his shack from town he had one hanging on his belt. He gave Shorty the makings he had brought out for him and he saw Shorty studying the gun like a hen looking sidewise at a glass egg.

"What's that, kid?"

"Why," Jimmy said casually, "it's a gun."

Shorty pushed back his ragged hat. "Well, I do know," he said quizzically. "That's what I thought it was."

"Yep," Jimmy said, "that's what she is."

"A gun," Shorty said. He shaded his eyes with a hand to stare down at Jimmy. Shorty was six feet and nine inches high, so it was only natural that Mariposa County address him as Short Stuff, usually asking at the same time how the weather was up there.

Jimmy repeated, "Yep." He felt a little uncomfortable.

"Well, now," Shorty said conversationally, "I always wanted a big gun like that myself but I ain't never had the price of her at the right time. Of course, there ain't a lot you can shoot at out here, barrin' a horny toad or a lizard. And I reckon they'd be downright hard to hit, without a fella was pretty handy with that cannon."

Jimmy licked a smoke. "I aim to get handy with it."

"Well, what in the nation you got against horny toads and lizards, kid?"

Jimmy took a deep breath. "I just got this gun because I thought I wouldn't feel safe without it." His eyes flickered up uncertainly. "I just wanted to have her."

Shorty pushed his old hat farther back on his head and it fell off and rolled drunkenly on the uneven floor of the shack. "Safe from what?"

"Well, I had Ab Shaker and his outfit in mind, Shorty."

"Ab Shaker? Hell, kid, we don't even know that fella."

"Nope," Jimmy said, "but I think we're goin' to."

Shorty champed his chew visibly. "We are?" He stuck his head forward and stabbed his glance down at the dusty top of Jimmy's hat. "What reason we got to go pokin' around his spread?"

Jimmy, hunkering on his heels, held his smoke under the sole of his boot and ground it out. "I wasn't thinkin' of lookin' him up, Shorty."

I should hope to holler you wasn't. That fella's bad medicine."

"But I ain't sure but what he's thinkin' of droppin' in on us."

Shorty stopped chewing. "He don't know us from Adam's off ox. He's got nothin' to hold against us."

"Well," Jimmy said, "he might study up something."

"I'd like to know what."

"Well," Jimmy said, in a strange misery, "I just married his girl, for one thing."

Shorty opened his mouth and swallowed his chew. "His what?"

"His girl, Shorty. What else would I marry?"

"By the Horn Spoon, kid, I never knowed he had one! How—"

"I didn't either until today."

"—you find time to of been sparkin'?"

"I just met her the first time today, in town."

Shorty bulged his eyes. "Lordy, kid, that's different. I thought you said you married her."

Jimmy looked up in distress and bared his teeth. "I did, damn it."

"All right," Shorty yelled. "Then you're just naturally loco! You tryin' to stand there and tell me you just met Ab Shaker's sweetheart and married up with her all in one day? Are you?"

Jimmy stood up. "Look, Shorty. I happened to meet her. She needed some help. She needed it bad. She didn't know where to look for it—you know Jordan is Ab Shaker's town. What kind of a fella would I be, not to give her a hand?"

"So you married her."

"It ain't as crazy as it sounds. I had to. It was the only thing I could study out to do. She was runnin' away from Ab Shaker. She was hidin' out from him when I found her. He was set on marryin' her himself, but she'd run out on him. It's a long story, but that's what it settles down to. Well, I couldn't help her get away, out of the state. That takes *dinero*. But I had to do somethin'. Every time she thought of Ab Shaker catchin' her—and he was bound to do it, sooner or later—she busted out cryin' and shiverin'. . . . Well, hell!"

Shorty sneered vehemently. "So you married her."

"We went to Judge Mead's and tied her up. It's one thing sure, Ab Shaker can't make her marry him if she's already married to somebody else, even if he finds her now before dark. That's when I'm goin' back after her. Or even if he comes bustin' out here later on."

Shorty looked horrified. "You mean you're bringin' her out here?" His eyes bored into Jimmy's.

Jimmy swallowed guiltily. "There ain't anywheres else to take her, Shorty."

Shorty sat down in the open door and put his hands over his face. He groaned.

Jimmy drummed up some uneasy defiance. "Well, where's your gentlemanly instincts? What would you do, pitch her out to a coyote like Ab Shaker?"

Shorty moaned. "There's a hell of a difference between a gentleman and a damn fool, kid." He took his hands away from his anguished face. "Ab Shaker can't marry another man's wife. So you hitch up to her. Didn't it get through your thick skull that Ab

Shaker could marry another man's widow? Hey?"

Jimmy put his hand on the sixgun at his belt and cleared his throat.

"Lordy! Now he's goin' to shoot it out with Ab Shaker." Shorty put his hands back over his face. After a while he asked bitterly, "I reckon she's pretty as a spotted pup?"

"I didn't rightly notice."

"Yah," snarled Shorty. "I'd like to see them gentlemanly instincts of yours workin' for a old mud fence like the Widow Susie, for one. Git outa my sight!" Shorty reeled to his feet and turned and faced the interior of their ramshackle cabin. "Kicked plumb outa my own poor little ol' home. And likely won't live to move back in." He staggered away.

"YOU'LL like Shorty," Jimmy said. It was dusk. They were riding out from town in Shorty's buckboard. The girl sat far over on the left end of the wobbling seat. She was muffled in a gray cape and so far had been pretty quiet. Well, you couldn't expect anything else. She'd been having a time of it.

Her name was Jenny Moore. She hadn't told Jimmy her whole story but he savvied that she had met Ab Shaker in Kansas City. She had been living there with her uncle, a cattle buyer. Shaker, a business acquaintance, had come out to the uncle's for dinner while he was in the city and Jenny Moore had been interested in him.

So he had come back. He made trips to Kansas City to see her for a year or so, and during that time he had evidently been putting on his Sunday behavior. Finally they had talked about marriage. She didn't know. Ab promised her everything; begged her to change her mind and come out to New Mexico and make him a happy man.

He went back home and fired letters at her. Presently her uncle started a trip West and on the spur of the moment she went with him. She wrote Ab that they were coming to Jordan.

He was on hand to meet them. He was a very happy man. Her letter had made him so happy that he'd gone on one of his week's drunks and was just winding it up when they pulled in. He had a half dozen of his ABC crew with him and they helped him carry Jenny off the stage in royal style. They started at once for Ab's spread. Jenny was scared, tried to talk to him. Her uncle intervened. Ab went for him and her uncle knocked him down. A couple of Ab's men then held her uncle while Ab pistol whipped him until he was more dead than alive. All of this in town, but no one interfered.

During the fight Jenny got away. She happened to duck in the Widow Susie's and the widow hid her for the rest of the day and that night helped her carry her uncle into her house. Ab had left him in the street and he had lain there for two hours, until dark. No one had dared to touch him.

With the widow nursing her uncle, Jenny had been afraid to do anything the next day except hide. Jimmy had found her there when he'd gone into the widow's for dinner. The widow had decided to tell him about her, on the chance that he would have the guts to help her in defiance of Ab Shaker's iron authority in the country.

That was the story. So far, he was getting away with it. He had picked Jenny up an hour before at the widow's and gotten out of town with her unseen. Her uncle was still in bad shape, but the doctor, prevailed upon by the widow to look at the beaten man, said he'd be all right in time. Right now he was helpless. The best thing they could do was leave him at the widow's.

Jenny Moore said in a muffled voice, "The point is, will he like me? You're forcing me on him. He might not want to risk his life—"

"Shucks," Jimmy said, "he's honin' to meet you. He's just naturally rearin' to do whatever he can for you. Shorty's just the kind of fella that jumps in with both feet when he sees any mortal in trouble."

"I would never have believed yesterday that I'd meet two men like you, Mr. Sears. Out here in this—this place."

"Why, I ain't done anything to speak of, ma'am. Not yet, anyhow."

"You married me," she said, with tears in her voice. "A woman you'd never seen or heard of before."

"Good Lord," Jimmy said, embarrassed, "you're the one to quarrel about that, ma'am. You got friends back East that'll likely make it hot for you if they find out you was spliced to a busted, no good, mangy, plugged nickel halfway rancher. Me, I'm proud of it. I mean," he added immediately, "I'm proud to find a woman would marry me, even if it didn't mean anything and she had to get scared into it to boot."

"My friends. . . . I'll never be able to face them again—if I ever can get back."

"Sure you will. You'll be laughin' about it six months from now."

"Uncle John won't be."

"Your uncle should of had more sense than to haul you into this. You'd think he'd of known Ab Shaker for what he was."

"It wasn't his fault. He scarcely knew Ab, except for seeing him in Kansas City. And Ab was—was entirely different there. Oh, he was all different."

"Any pack rat's mighty cautious when he's away from his hole."

They were quiet for a while. Clouds rolled over the stars and the night turned black.

She said, "How can your horse see in the dark?"

"He don't. A horse don't see as good at night as you do. He knows the way by feel."

There was another interval of silence.

"Then Ab won't follow me tonight at least?"

"I don't look for him," Jimmy said easily. "Fact is, I don't look for him at all. First place, he don't know where you've gone and he don't know how to find out. Second place, he might think twice before takin' a crack at Shorty and me, even if he feels like doin' it after he finds out you're already married, *if* he finds it out, which I doubt in the first place." He crossed his fingers, under cover of darkness.

She giggled wistfully. "I wish I could believe you, Mr. Sears. I wish I really knew what was going to happen to me."

"You'll be all right. You'll be back in Kansas City in no time. Soon as Shorty and me figures a way to get you there. If we have to take you ourselves."

"It's an awfully long way. And Uncle John—"

"Don't worry about him. Ab won't bother him any more, long as you ain't in the picture. Your uncle's company's in back of him and that's enough to shake Ab off from gettin' too rough." Jimmy hooked the lines and built a smoke. His match flared, a tiny white burst in the immensity of the night. "Don't worry about anything, ma'am. Try and catch some sleep if you want to. I reckon you're about wore out."

She was quiet and he thought she was sleeping. Then she murmured, "I wonder why I trusted myself to you, Mr. Sears."

"Why," he answered, surprised, "because the widow told you to." For some obscure reason her remark galled him a little, or maybe he was only all in too. He looked over at her, a slight gray shadow in the reflected glow of his cigarette. She didn't stir. This time she was asleep.

SHORTY wasn't on hand to greet them at the shack. Jimmy found him later, bedded down by their makeshift corral, enjoying the mellow company of a few little calves that were penned off from their mamas. Jimmy slung down his bedroll. He spoke cheerfully to Shorty, who answered in free style, so Jimmy shut up and turned in. He looked toward the shack. The yellow light at its window died out. He settled himself to sleep,

lulled by the hoarse mutterings from Shorty and the unhappy bleating from the calves.

In an interval of silence he thought he heard a foreign sound drifting on the night wind. From some place, far out on the range, came a sound like trotting horses. He sat up. He reached for the big .44 and held it in his lap. A considerable time went by. He grew more sleepy, but he thought of the terrified Jenny Moore and kept himself awake. The sky turned gray over the lumpy Sandias and dawn came. With a long breath of relief Jimmy crawled out of his blankets to start the day's work.

The girl could cook. She put their meals together and the result was somewhat better than Shorty's product. But Shorty wouldn't go inside the shack to eat. He accepted his grub at the door and carried it over to the shade of the cottonwood to polish it off. He didn't say much to Jenny Moore. He gave her a long, hard look and growled, "You're a pretty little filly. Kind of peaked, though," and stalked away, his joints creaking.

"He don't mean it like that," Jimmy said. "It's just his way. He likes to act ornery. He don't want people to find out what a sentimental old curly wolf he is."

"Yes," Jenny Moore said timidly, "I heard him talking to you last night."

Jimmy's face turned red. "You shouldn't of listened to that. He was talkin' in his sleep."

She smiled timidly. "You look like you're talking in yours." Her face clouded. "Did you—you must have stayed awake all night. Oh, you shouldn't have!" She looked real upset.

Jimmy gulped coffee and felt his ears burn. "I couldn't sleep."

"You were watching for Ab Shaker."

He looked directly at her. "Well, from the looks of you, you're still scared to a shadow."

She bit her trembling lip.

"Forget about it, ma'am. Me and Shorty'll have you on your way home in a couple days, soon as we study out a way. We'll stay pretty close around the shack until then, anyhow."

"You mustn't neglect your work."

He grinned wryly. "There ain't too much work right now. Shorty and me are trying to build up a kind of a start here. We got a little bunch of cows and a heap of time. That's about all."

"But even so, I can't stay here. Not even two days. If Ab should come—"

"Don't forget," Jimmy said, "he'd have Shorty to handle besides me. And that Shorty is as tough a—"

Shorty galloped into the shack. He was shaking and his eyes bulged in his whiskered face. He stood by the table making motions.

Jimmy kicked back his chair. "What's the matter?"

Shorty gestured, opening and closing his mouth. His Adam's apple danced wildly up and down. He choked out: "Shaker!"

Jimmy didn't look at the girl. He heard her short gasp of pure terror, and, holding his breath, he walked to the door and out.

He saw a lone rider a quarter of a mile away. He began to breathe again. Shaker by himself could not be looking for trouble. He never went into an argument without a block of his hands to back him.

Jimmy walked out from the shack. He got as far as the cottonwood before Shaker met him. If he could keep him away from the shack—

He put his thumbs in his belt. That didn't feel too safe, so he rested his right hand on the butt of the .44. That sixgun felt fine, but he saw the worn ivory grips of Shaker's guns and wondered if it was true that Ab could draw and fire while you were batting your eyes. That slim, dark, sneering little man, with his dandy's mustache and his delicate, calloused thumbs, was a legend throughout the country for his lightning draw. Why, hell, he had killed Ace Mountings, and everyone knew Ace had been the boss of west

Texas, where they really grew them mean.

Jimmy's breath stuck in his neck again and wouldn't go up or down. Shaker rested in his saddle, his wrists crossed lazily over the horn, and spoke:

"Howdy, fella. Your name Sears?"

Jimmy nodded.

"I'm Ab Shaker," The ferine eyes were black and hard. The deadly, graceful little man moved a hand and Jimmy tensed. Shaker extended the hand empty.

Jimmy hesitated. It might be a trick. Pretend to shake hands; hold his right hand while drawing and firing with his left. They said Ab Shaker packed a belly gun for his left hand. Jimmy shook the offered hand and nothing happened.

"I was passing," Shaker said, "and I noticed a break in your north fence. Don't know whether any of your stuff's come through or not. If they have we'll cut 'em out for you when we gather. Hope you'll do the same for us if you find some ABC stuff over here."

Jimmy started breathing again. "Sure."

Shaker picked up the reins. "Well, thought I'd drop by and mention it. Wanted to have a look at your outfit anyhow."

"Well, thanks," Jimmy said. "Much obliged."

Shaker raised his hand and rode away.

Jimmy sat down on the ground for a while until his knees would hold him up. He then went back to the shack. Happened to be passing by, Shaker had said. He grinned unevenly. He wasn't fooled. Shaker was out hunting. Hunting for Jenny Moore. Had he seen anything while sitting his bay horse there, a hundred yards from the shack? Probably. Those bright, weasel eyes would miss nothing. He was probably on his way back now for some help. He'd been afraid to make trouble alone.

Jimmy went in and saw the girl. He said, "Where's Shorty?"

Then he saw that she was laughing, and her dark violet eyes were misty, and he put it down to hysterics. She gestured. "In there under the bunks."

The day wore along. Shorty went out to ride the north fence. Jimmy poked around home, guarding the shack. The need for sleep was wearing him down. He wouldn't be able to stay awake tonight. He hated to ask Shorty to do it. Anyhow, Shorty wouldn't. Shorty was threatening to light out for Canada. Well, you couldn't blame him. It would be different if he had brought home a real wife. But this way Shorty figured it was all wrong, and the wrongest thing of all was Ab Shaker.

He drowsed in the sun, half asleep, and heard Jenny Moore cleaning up the cabin. That was the article that had been the last frypan on the pack saddle for Shorty, when he had seen the girl tearing up the shack that he had furnished with his own hands, moving everything out of its place, and worst of all happening to tear that paper picture of Flossie LaRue in tights, when she tried to untack it from the wall in order to smear out the cobwebs around it.

But Jimmy didn't blame Jenny Moore. She had to keep busy. You could tell that to look at her haunted eyes. She had to keep busy to hold a snaffle on herself. If she sat still and just thought she'd worry and go to pieces. It was a hell of a thing to put a fresh, slim little trick of a girl like that in such a fix. It was up to him to get her back to her home. Ab Shaker was bound to be back.

He went to sleep.

HE WOKE up and it was dark. The quarter moon was in the middle of a misty sky.

"Awake?"

He jumped, turned his head. Jenny Moore was sitting on the front steps beside him. Her blue black hair was dimly lustrous in the moonlight.

"I didn't aim to sleep."

He saw her smiling. "I've been keep-

ing some supper hot for you. Aren't you hungry?" Her skirts rustled and she stood up.

He washed his face and slicked down his hair. His eyes were still sticky with sleep. He went in and saw her sitting at the table. The lamp was turned low. He stared at her. She was pale and shadowy and lovely.

"What's the matter, Mr. Sears?"

He moved into his chair. "I guess I never really looked at you before. You're a—" he realized what he was saying and was shocked—"dang good cook."

She laughed and said, "Thank you." She stood up to pour his coffee and serve beans and bacon and biscuits from the stove. He felt a little uncomfortable, having her wait on him, and kept his head down and ate hungrily.

She sat down again and said, "I've been thinking, that . . . How far is it up to Albuquerque?"

He looked up sharply. "Three, four days. Why?"

"I was thinking that if I could get up there, I could telegraph to Uncle John's friends in Kansas City, and they could help me get home some way."

Jimmy thought it over. "What if they wouldn't?"

"At least I'd be out of Ab's reach there. I could work. I could work in a —oh, in a restaurant or some place, if I had to."

He grinned. "You ain't very husky for a biscuit shooter, ma'am."

"No, I'm serious. I could get along somehow."

"I reckon you could." He swallowed some coffee. "But it's kind of tough on a—a pretty girl alone anywheres."

"Yes," she said quietly, "I know it is. But I can't think of anything else."

He said presently, "It wouldn't seem right for me to turn you out thataway."

"My goodness, you don't owe me anything, Mr. Sears. You've done more for me already than I could ever repay." She said almost fiercely, "You have no obligation to me!"

"Yeah," he said finally. "Yeah, I guess that's right. We can pull out in the mornin'."

"I'LL tell you," Shorty said in the morning, "if you're downright serious about startin' her outa here, you're welcome to my buckboard, or my horses, or my saddle, or my boots, or my hat, or my shirt, or even my pants."

"All right," Jimmy said harshly. "All I want's the wagon."

Shorty frowned sympathetically. Now that he was on the point of getting his house back again he felt like he could be generous. "Now get me straight, kid. I got nothin' against your woman. But I got a lot against gettin' checked out by Ab Shaker, and against gettin' moved outa my house, and against havin' a strange female around day and night so a man can't act natural."

"She ain't my woman," Jimmy said stolidly, dabbing his loop at his harness broke horse and missing.

"Well, that's what I mean, kid. If she was your woman, a man could feel more decent around here."

Jimmy turned on him, his blue eyes cold in his brown face. "What was that, Shorty?"

"Why, I only meant that she wouldn't be like a outright stranger if—"

"Well, I didn't like the way it sounded."

"All right! Hellfire!"

"And lay off that free style language. She can hear you."

"Why, you half-growed, sheep-eared button, you tryin' to tell me to shet up? What the hell's got into you? You gone sweet on her?"

Jimmy dropped his rope and started swinging. Shorty pushed him back and held him at arm's length, which was too far away for Jimmy to reach him, and then Jimmy saw that Shorty wasn't swinging back, and he saw Shorty's face pasty under his whiskers and saw his eyes fixed on something beyond him, and he turned around and looked.

A little cloud of dust was moving

steadily toward them. Now he could make out a knot of small figures. They grew. He stared until his eyes ached. He made out Ab Shaker, a slight figure sitting straight in the saddle.

Jimmy turned away and walked swiftly out into the sage toward them, to stop them as far as possible from the shack. Shorty appeared, striding along at his elbow. Jimmy said, "Go on, line out. This ain't your trouble."

"Button up, little man," Shorty said. He wrenched off a chew of tobacco. "This is the genuine article."

The riders were close. The hoofs of the horses thumped in a confusion of hollow sound. Some of the hands carried carbines in saddle scabbards. All of them seemed to have sixguns thonged at their thighs. All of them looked as if they knew how to use them. A couple of them were Mexicans. One looked like a 'breed Indian. One was a barrel-chested giant with a black beard and a deep scar down one side of his face, through one eye, like a black gully in brush. Ab Shaker raised his hand and the outfit pulled down and he said,

"Morning, Sears." The man at his back kept an ominous quiet. Jimmy could hear Shorty breathing like a windbroke horse.

"Howdy."

"Hope you don't mind if we prod around your spread. We're looking for a horse." His obsidian eyes were emotionless. "A prize horse," he said. "A sorrel colt."

"I ain't seen him."

"I think he came through on the creek. We look for him to be back in the brush beyond it."

"Well, go ahead through, if you want to."

"Much obliged."

They rode on. Jimmy looked at Shorty and Shorty looked back. They walked toward the shack.

Jenny Moore appeared in the doorway and called, "I'm ready, Mr. Sears!"

She hadn't seen them. She hadn't known they were around. She didn't know they were still close; she didn't see their heads turning to look at her; she didn't see Shaker pull up his horse. Jimmy heard Shorty rip out some cussing and he ran toward the shack.

Then the girl caught some movement at the corner of her vision and turned and saw Ab Shaker cutting out from his outfit and riding toward the shack. She stood still. Jimmy was close to her. He saw terror strike into her face.

He heard Ab Shaker call, "Sears!" and he turned, his hand hovering over the sixgun. This was it. Shaker's men had him covered, that was sure, although he didn't take the time to look toward them. But he'd go out fighting.

He watched Shaker trot his horse in close. He stood still, tense as a coiled spring. He couldn't beat Shaker's draw. But he could try.

"I forgot to mention," Shaker said in his flat, dead voice, "that my boys found out the creek's turned its course. If it dries up that water hole you've got back there, you're welcome to come over and use the new one it's digging out on my side, long as it don't go too dry."

Jimmy tried to nod his head. It jerked up and down like a gun hammer. Shaker was playing with him. He was laughing, behind those opaque, murderous eyes. Jimmy blurted, "Meet my wife."

Now it would come.

For an instant a little expression came into Shaker's face and he looked at Jimmy with something like puzzlement, and then turned in his saddle and bowed to Jenny. She was stiff, white as marble, unmoving.

"How do, ma'am." Again a brief expression flitted over his hawk face. "I seem to recollect seeing you somewhere before. Are you from around this country?"

Jimmy wanted to yell, "You know where she's from, damn your hide!" He said calmly, "She came out from the East."

Shaker bowed again with level, unhurried courtesy. "My mistake. I hope you'll find it pleasant out here, ma'am." He settled his hat back on his head and lifted his hand and neck reined his

horse around and loped back to his outfit. They rode away.

Shorty dropped the rocks he held in each hand. "I do know," he said huskily. "I do know!"

Jimmy uncoiled and took an unsteady step toward the shack. Jenny Moore hadn't moved. Her face was scarlet. Her hands were trembling. Her breath caught in a sob and she turned and ran back inside, and Jimmy looked after her in amazement.

SHE lay face down on one of the bunks, and her slender shoulders shook as she wept. Jimmy sat down on the edge of the bunk and put a hand cautiously on her arm. "Hey," he said, "don't do that. Don't do that, Jenny."

Her voice was muffled and shaken. "I can't face you. I couldn't—couldn't face anyone. I'm so—so terribly ashamed!"

"Why, what about? We just bluffed him away, that's all."

"Oh, you know better than that! You could see he didn't even know me. You know everything I've told is just an awful lie."

"Well, I did think of that, but I guess you've got a good reason, anyhow."

She twisted around and sat up, leaning against the wall. Her eyes were humiliated but determined and brave; and starry with tears. "It was Uncle John I was trying to get away from. Not Ab Shaker."

"Ain't he your real uncle?"

"Yes, oh yes. It's nothing like that. I came out to live with him two years ago. I didn't have anyone else left. I didn't know then what he did. And after I found out it was too late. There was no way I could run away from him, and if I did there was no place to go."

"What did he do?"

"He sold patent medicine."

"Well, there ain't anything so terrific about that, is there?"

"It wasn't any good. It made people sick. Uncle John knew he was cheating them, but he didn't care. We were always having to drive away from towns in the middle of the night because the people would get sick on Uncle John's medicine and then come to lynch him. They almost caught him twice. It was horrible.

"I did run away from him once. I almost starved before he found me again. I never tried it again, but it seemed I *had* to do something. I couldn't go on with him forever. He was drinking himself to death, and when he was drunk he complained about having to take care of me, but he made me help sell his medicine."

"You mean," asked Jimmy, his mouth dry, "you had to—"

"I sang hymns and played a little mandolin. Uncle John always started selling by preaching a sermon. Then he took up a collection for the sermon and then he sold medicine. He said that drew crowds, and he preached about hellfire because he said that made people afraid to go there, so they bought his medicine to keep their health. But they were always coming after him with tar and feathers before morning."

"But Shaker really beat up your uncle! A heap of people told me they seen it."

She nodded unhappily. "Uncle John was preaching in another town and Mr. Shaker happened to be there, and he bought a whole crate of the medicine to give to his hands, because Uncle John said it would make you just twice as strong and half as hungry, and I suppose Mr. Shaker thought he could get more work from his men, with less food. Uncle John sold a lot of it to ranchers for that reason.

"Then, just the next week, we happened to come into Jordan, and the first person we saw was Mr. Shaker, and he recognized Uncle John. Some of his men were with him, and they all jumped on Uncle John and they almost killed him.

"I was terrified. I didn't know what to do. I was afraid no one would help me if I told the truth. No one would

believe that I wasn't just as much of a—a cheat as Uncle John was. So I made up that story about Mr. Shaker and Kansas City, all of it. I saw how the people in the town felt about him, and I—I was desperate, so I told it to that lady—Widow Susie.

"I thought Uncle John's life depended on getting some help, anyway. And then later, when she was taking care of him, I couldn't tell the truth. It would only have made it worse. And then you came, and I—I had to go on through with it. I only wanted to get away. To some place where I could find some sort of a job. Some place where I could be safe.

"But I've been so miserable and ashamed. All you were doing for me, and for a lie. . . ." She bent her head and said brokenly: "Just let me go away. I'll go back to—"

"Well, look," Jimmy said, "not back to your uncle."

"No, no. I think he—he's been looking for someone like the Widow Susie for a long time. She has some property and he can be awfully charming. I doubt if he'll go on with his medicine."

"Then they ought to hit it off. The widow's been lookin' for someone like him for a long time, herself. She's had her eye on Shorty. He ain't dared to go into town for the last year. He'd be right glad to hear it. But look here, your uncle ain't got any friends in the East you can telegraph to?"

"Please don't say any more. I'll be all right. I'll—"

"Well, look," Jimmy said huskily. "Come right down to it, you're my wife. A man can't have his wife runnin' around over the country loose thataway."

She smiled and tears rolled down her cheeks and she brushed them away. "You'll never forgive me for that. I don't see how I could have done it. I've been a—a cheap—"

"Well, look," Jimmy said, "you don't know me very well, but you're a first rate cook."

Color rose in her face. "Oh, I couldn't do that! Please!"

Jimmy was silent. "The devil of it is," he said at last, "I can't let you go away either. I come to see that this mornin'. I couldn't rope a horse to take you away. Just somehow, I couldn't catch him."

She shook her head and wouldn't look at him.

"You still don't savvy," he said, his voice low. "If you'll stick around and do the cookin', well, maybe. . . . If you'll just stick around and give me a chance. . . ." His voice stumbled. "It come to me last night that was what I was goin' to have to do. I didn't aim to come right out with it, but—"

"You're making it up," she whispered. "You're trying to be kind to me." She raised her head and there was a shyness in her eyes that was new. "You must be," she insisted. "The same thing couldn't have happened to both of us. At the same time."

It took a couple of minutes for her meaning to soak in. Then Shorty stamped into the shack and Jimmy straightened quickly. Shorty, whistling under his breath, took down the torn paper picture of Flossie La Rue in tights. Still whistling, he went out. They watched him go down to the corral and they heard the crack of his hammer as he nailed it up to the bars.

Pilgrims in

By Frank C. Robertson

THE STORY SO FAR:

VAL HEATON and BILL GENTRY, wandering punchers.

LIJE, FROST, ULAS and CLAY SATTERFIELD, outlaw brothers.

CROSS-EYED BIRDIE, leader of the outlaw clan and Lije's wife.

IDA MAY, a girl who lives with the Satterfields.

DELLY, Frost's wife.

BULL BECKER, former leader of the outlaws.

JACK CRADLEBAUGH, a Satterfield man.

QUANNY, renegade Indian in Birdie's employ.

After an unsuccessful attempt at escape, Ida May is returned to the Satterfield hide-out in Poison Valley, where she is to be forced to marry Clay. Val Heaton and Bill Gentry find, on an old man killed trying to help Ida May escape, a packet of money with instructions that it be given to her and also the information that she was kidnaped from North Carolina and brought West by the Satterfields. Val and Bill start for Poison Valley to give her the money and help her escape.

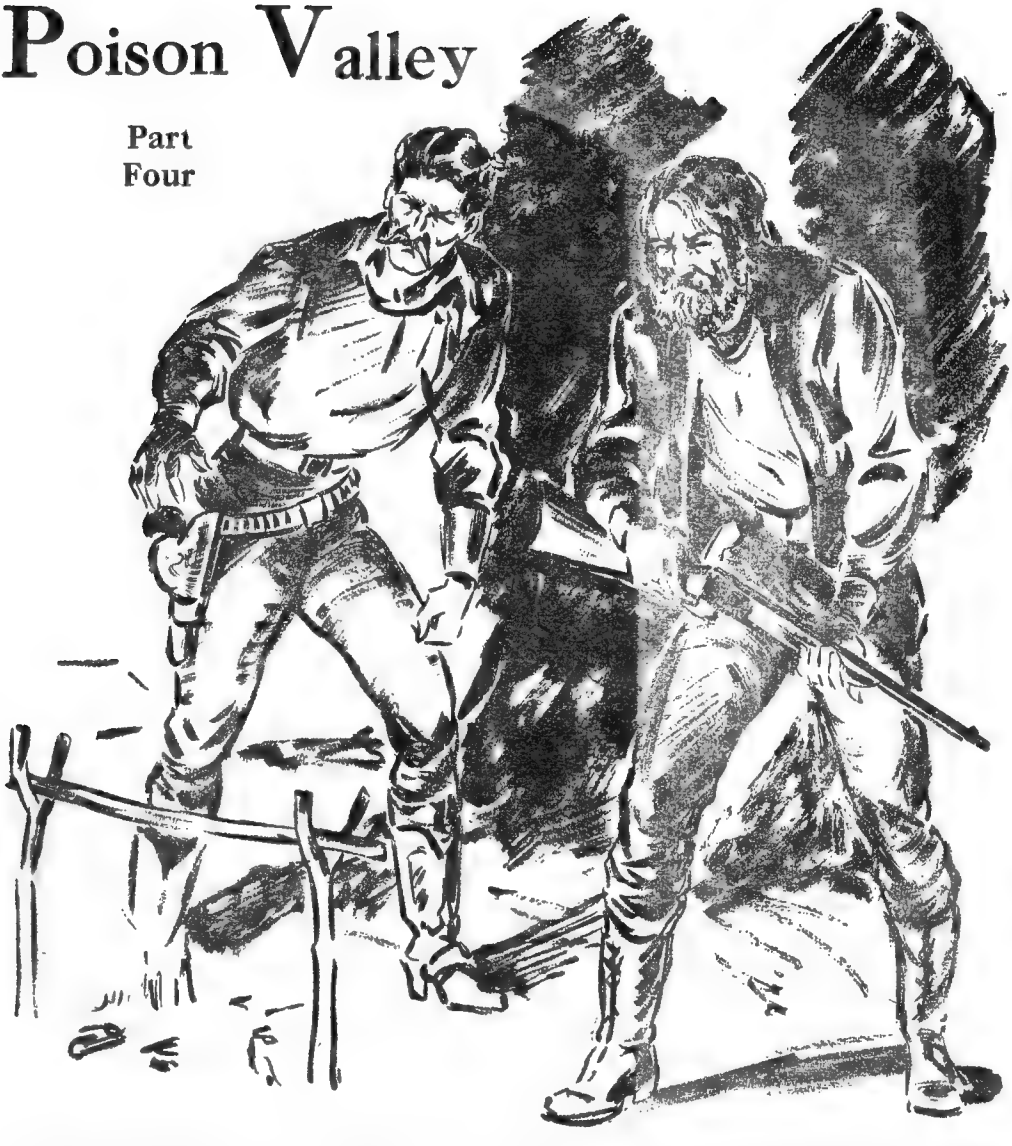
On the way they rescue Bull Becker from a cave where Birdie has kept him three years in an attempt to get him to reveal his money cache. They next encounter Lije Satterfield and trick him into guiding them to Poison Valley. Confronted by Birdie and her orders that the intruders be shot, Val daringly saves their lives by kissing her. By torturing Bill, Birdie tries to force them to tell their purpose in coming here; but, because she has fallen for Val, she ceases without learning anything.

The next day Birdie, Val and Birdie's Indians unsuccessfully hunt for Bull Becker. Cradlebaugh, who is in love with Birdie, follows, and Birdie tries to get him and Val to fighting. Instead Val saves Cradlebaugh's life when Birdie turns on him. As a result, Cradlebaugh slips him a knife with which to defend himself the next day in a fight with Clay, during which Frost tries to knife Val. Meanwhile Ida May is hidden by Delly, who reveals her hiding place to Val.

That night Val and Bill get Ida May away from the Satterfields, but Val is forced to kill Apache Tom whom Frost has ordered to get Val. And also, in a scuffle with the cook, Val upsets a lamp which sets fire to Birdie's house. In the commotion Val, Ida May and Bill reach a pass leading from the valley. It is being guarded by Cradlebaugh whom they persuade to join them. All escape to the breaks where they put through a scorching day without food or water.

Poison Valley

Part Four



Birdie and Quanny wait for a signal from the Indians who are searching for the fugitives. Finally comes a smoke signal telling that one white person —man or woman—has been captured.

CHAPTER XV

Bull Becker's Stronghold

VAL strained his eyes until they ached, hoping to catch sight of Bill Gentry. He dared not get too far from the girl, for by this time the rocks might be swarming with Quanny's Indians.

Once, not long before sundown, he saw smoke signals go up. They boded no good. He was sure that either Bill or Cradlebaugh had come upon disaster. The latter had been a fool to leave the rocks in daylight. It was quite likely, however, that the man had repented of going with them, and would try to make his peace with the Satterfields by leading them to their hiding place. Val had long since decided to change their hiding place as soon as it came dark enough to move.

His tongue was getting thick by the time the sun went down, but the cool-

ness gave some relief. He stole back to Ida May in the dusk.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"All right, except for a slight headache. There's still no sign of Bill?"

"Not a sign."

"I saw smoke signals. What do they mean?"

"They mean we'd better be moving out of here. We can't stand another day like this without water. We can't leave Bill, but he may be hidin' some place to join us after dark. So I'm going to try to get us some water."

"But how, where?"

"I don't know yet, but I have an idea that I think will work out."

His idea was a risky one indeed, for he contemplated nothing less than a return to Poison Valley for the supplies they had been unable to secure because of their hasty flight from the sinister place.

Val and Ida May moved considerably closer to the edge of the breaks, and Val left the girl while he went still farther down to wait another hour or so for Bill, and to try to intercept any prowler who might be trying to locate them in the darkness.

He was almost to give it up when he heard the peculiar *hoo-hoohoo* call of a ground owl only a short way distant. He listened until the call was repeated again; then put his fingers to his lips and duplicated the call. He was answered by a slightly different note, and his next reply was more drawn out, *hoo-hoo-hoo-hoohoo.*

Only a few minutes later he saw a figure scrambling furtively through the rocks.

"Bill!" he called softly. "Over here, Bill."

A moment later Bill Gentry dropped down beside him.

"You danged old cuss you, you sure give me a scare," Val said. "I thought they'd got you."

"How do you like livin' among these rocks?" Bill grinned.

"It's pure hell, and I'm not foolin'. We got to git some water."

Bill swung something around in front of him. "Have a swig," he invited.

"Yuh don't mean—" Val hefted the goatskin water bag, which contained anyway a gallon of water. Even the damp feel of the bag was a relief. "This is the kind of water bag the Indians carry," he said tentatively.

"Yep," Bill nodded. "The cuss who had this didn't wanta give it up. I had to knock him over the head twice with a rock to persuade him. Then the thing was empty, and I hadda wait till dark before I could git back from the river."

"Come on," Val said urgently.

"Ain't you gonna have a drink?"

"Not till Ida May has one. That girl's a brick—not one word of complaint all day. But Cradlebaugh went off his nut and started to hunt for water."

"So that's what the yellin' was about," Bill commented. "I was some afraid it was you."

"What do you mean?"

"While I was hidin' under the river bank waitin' a chance to slip away, I heard one hell-raisin' commotion, and I knew them Injuns who was watchin' the gorge had caught theirselves something. It musta been Cradlebaugh. Anyway, it give me a chance to sneak away."

"The poor devil!" Val said. "We saw smoke signals. Better not say anything to Ida May about this."

The girl was where Val had left her. She had made no outcry, but her pleasure at seeing them moved both men.

"Here, you have a drink," Val said. "Old Bill here has been down to the river." He held the bag while the girl quenched her thirst. He admired the restraint with which she drank.

Val passed the bag to Bill, who shook his head. Val drank sparingly.

"Well," he said, "shall we travel?"

"The only way we'd have a chance is to make for Cox's Landin'," Bill replied. "That must be over a hundred miles, barren country near all the way, and we're on foot. They'd pick us up before we got halfway."

He paused and the others waited. On

matters of this kind Val was willing to bow to Bill's experience.

"We got water now, and if Miss Idy May kin stand to eat lizards like Bull Becker does, our best bet is to hang right here for a few days till the excitement dies down. Not that it won't be dangerous a-plenty, but the other way would be worse."

"That's what I think," Val said. "And we won't have to eat lizards, not as long as this outlaw outfit runs cattle up here on the mesa. And when we leave we want horses."

"Then we better git us a heap farther up these rocks," Bill said. "There's caves up above somewhere, and where there's caves there may be water."

They began to climb. It was hard, dangerous work even in daylight. Old Bill led the way, with Val bringing up the rear where he could catch one of the others if they happened to fall.

It was long past midnight when they struck a narrow ledge with a sharp overhang overhead. They followed it for several hundred yards, then Bill stopped abruptly.

"Look!" he called. "Private rooms for everybody."

"With bath?" Val asked.

"No—damn! With rattlesnakes," Bill howled, as there came an ominous buzz.

"Fine house hunter you are," Val jeered. The rattle of the snake had caused Ida May to cling to him suddenly. He found it pleasant.

Bill finished the snake with a rock, but nobody cared to enter the row of caves under the overhang. The ledge itself ended a few rods beyond, and when Val tossed a rock over the end of it they could hear it bouncing and rolling hundreds of feet down.

The men made sure there were no more snakes, and they crouched against the rocks to spend the remainder of the night. The chilly night air was as unpleasant as the hot day had been.

They dozed uneasily until a crimson glow in the east brought in the new day. They explored the shallow caves then. If they kept out the snakes the caves would be relatively safe, and they were cool. The problem now was to obtain food. They had no fuel even if they should find meat of some kind, and they were unable to stand the kind of food Bull Becker had got used to even if they faced starvation.

Each man took a drink of water, and leaving Ida May and the water bag behind, they went back along the ledge. Val was determined to get up on the mesa to look for food, and Bill decided to spend the day searching for water. They made careful note of their position and separated.

It was hard, risky climbing to reach the top, and Val was coming to regret that they had not headed for the top of the breaks first rather than the bottom. There were times when he negotiated some narrow ledge where a misstep would have sent him into space for hundreds of feet. Before the sun was an hour high it was hot, and he discovered that he was weaker from lack of food than he had thought.

Once he paused where he could look back over the whole country below, and to his surprise made out a gathering of at least a dozen people on top of a small, pulpit-shaped rock that was visible from almost any place on the face of the mesa. They seemed to be doing something, but he couldn't make out what it was.

"Jest git your hands up—and keep on lookin'," a voice spoke from just above and behind him.

Val gave a start. He was caught completely at a disadvantage. He raised his hands, heard somebody scrambling down the rocks. He braced himself. If the fellow came within reach they would both of them go over the cliffs below. But the scrambling stopped, and he heard a chuckle from ten feet away.

"So it's you, eh? Dawggone the luck, I waz gonna make you jump that cliff to see how fur you could roll."

Val whirled. "Bull Becker! So this is where you're hidin' out."

"Waitin' to git a shot at that she-devil," Becker said. "You huntin' me by any chance?" He was as unkempt as before; a tall menacing figure in his rags, with the barrel of Bill Gentry's rifle pointed steadily toward Val.

"Yes, but not for the reason you think," Val said. "We're hidin' from her, too. Did you know we burned her house down?"

"No? What happened?"

"Put down that rifle and I'll tell you."

Becker found a flat rock some twenty feet away and sat down with the weapon across his knee; it still pointed at Val.

"Takin' no chances on you, cowboy," he said. "Fur's I know the she-devil may of bribed you to lift my scalp."

Val laughed good naturedly, and told the ex-outlaw chief what had transpired.

"It's a good yarn if it's true," Becker said when he had finished.

"Well, I've got to rustle some grub," Val said, rising. "If you're goin' to use that gun on me, you'd better be doin' it, because I'm goin' away from here."

"Hol' your hosses, young feller," Becker said. "I kinda think you're tellin' the truth, and if you have you got in more licks than I have. If grub and water is all you want, I kin fix you up all right."

"You can? No lizards. Remember, we got a lady with us."

"You may be dinged glad to eat lizards and rockchucks 'fore you git outa this," Becker reproved half angrily. "But come with me; I'll give you all the jerky you kin carry back."

It was not a great distance back down the breaks until they came to a cave much larger than the ones Gentry had found. A couple of calf hides were lying on the rocks, and there were many strips of meat drying in the sun. In that hot, dry atmosphere the meat was as nourishing as though it had been cooked, and only slightly less palatable. Val thought he had never tasted anything better.

"Water?" he asked.

Bull Becker led the way to the back of the cave, which arched so high at the rear that Val couldn't see the ceiling. But he could hear a steady *drip, drip, drip* of water from overhead. Then Becker showed him a shallow pool which he had dug out to catch the water seeping through from above. It was clear and cold.

"Look here, Bull! Instead of carrying water down over these rocks, why don't I fetch my friends up here and live with you?"

"Shore, shore, go ahead. I'll go down with you," Becker said.

Val took enough of the jerky along to supply the immediate needs of Ida May and Bill. In the excitement of finding Becker he had forgotten about the men he had seen on top of the pulpit rock until they reached a place where the whole panorama of the badlands lay before them.

"My Gawd," Becker said. "It's them infernal Injuns, and they're torturin' somebody."

"Cradlebaugh!" Val ejaculated. "They must be doin' it in the hope that we'll see them."

"That's a typical trick of Cross-Eyed Birdie's," Bull said.

"I didn't think anybody could be so damn vicious," Val murmured. "Bull, we've gotta save that poor devil some way—or at least put him out of his misery."

They hurried on at the risk of their necks. Val signaled before they reached the place where he had left Ida May. The girl came running. She was half hysterical.

"Look!" she cried. "Those Indians—they're torturing somebody." From there the Indians could be plainly seen as they danced around someone who had been tied upon a sort of rock altar. Smoke seemed to be issuing from one end of it.

"Great God!" Val said. "They're cooking the man!"

"Oh, do something," the girl pleaded. "If nobody else will, I'll go down there

myself. It's Quanny's Indians, and Birdie must have told them to do what they're doing."

"It's Quanny's Indians, all right," Val agreed. "Birdie may or may not have told them to do it, but they've brought the man up there in sight with the hope that we'll do just what you say you'll do."

"Won't do no good, Idy May," Becker said. "They'd torture you too if they caught you."

"Oh," the girl moaned. Then, for the first time, she seemed to see Bull Becker. "Bull Becker," she breathed. "I knew what they were doing to you. I'd have helped you if I could."

"Yeah, I reckon you would, Idy May, an' I'm plumb ashamed I didn't kill a few Satterfields because of the mean way they treated you. Heaton here tells me ol' Ez Cupples got kilt tryin' to git you away. I wuz plumb fooled in the ol' reprobate. I didn't figger there was a decent impulse in his carcass."

"He was kind to me," Ida May said simply, "and he died for me."

"Howcome he didn't git you away?" Becker asked seriously.

"He tried. He got outside and bought a buckboard and a team of mules, and hid them as close as he could get to Poison Valley. Then he stole horses for us, and we thought we'd got away until they overtook us in the night, killed Uncle Ezra and brought me back."

"Was Birdie with 'em?"

"Yes."

"Been me I'd at least have got her," Becker said. "A he outlaw is bad enough, but a she one is a million times wuss."

"Here, Ida May, better have something to eat," Val said. "As soon as you get some strength, we'll go back to where Becker lives. It's safer and more comfortable."

"But that man," she protested. "You can't leave him like that."

"No," Val said, "I reckon we can't. You stay here till Bill Gentry comes back, Ida May, and tell him to follow our sign back to Becker's cave where there's plenty of food and water. Come on, Bull, let's see if we can git ourselves an Indian."

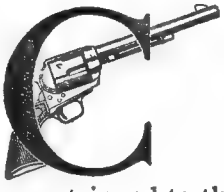
It was a minute before Ida May realized that she had rashly sent to possible death the man she now considered her sole protector.

"Come back," she cried shrilly. "Oh, please come back."

The answer echoed fadingly from far below. "You stay put till Bill comes back."

CHAPTER XVI

An Altar of Death



RADLEBAUGH lay stretched upon a cairn of rocks which his tormentors had erected for the occasion. He was stripped to the waist, and his torso revealed many cuts and bruises. The young Indian outlaws had not been gentle in their treatment of him. Moreover, he had not yet received the drink he had left the safety of the breaks to get. He was tightly bound, hand and foot, and his eyes glittered with pain and apprehension.

The preparations of his foes had been slow. Dreadfully slow. If they had only got it over with at once, he might have died like a man. But while they were building the cairn they had allowed him to see that they were leaving a hole under one end to compose a sort of open air oven over which he was to be slowly baked.

The man had but one hope. That was that in the end his former associates would not allow him to be burned. He hugged the thought to him with desperate hope that Birdie was only trying to frighten him, and at the last moment would relent. He had talked with her that morning.

Birdie had sent Quanny down the night before to handle his Indians, and she had arrived the next morning with

her husband and two brothers-in-law. That was just before they had taken Cradlebaugh up to the pulpit rock.

"Well, Jack," she had said, "it looks like you'd got yourself into a pickle by double-crossing your friends."

"Birdie, I didn't double-cross anybody," the man declared fervently. "You got me all wrong. In the first place Apache Tom left me, and I was alone. When that feller Heaton come he had the password, and I thought it was Apache Tom comin' back. He got the drop on me, and made me go with 'em."

"You hear that, Lije, he says he had to go with 'em?" the woman said, and Cradlebaugh took hope.

"Honest," he avowed. "I got away from 'em as soon as I could, and I was on my way to tell you where they are."

"And where are they?" Clay demanded.

"In the breaks. Let me go and I'll take you right to where they are."

"You think they're fools enough to stay where you left 'em? And you think we're fools enough to believe anything you say? Heaton would never have let you escape with your sixgun. You were trying to get to water, and maybe murder some of these Indians," Birdie told him harshly.

"Now look here—" the man began to bluster.

"Shut up!" she screamed so fiercely that the captive seemed to shrink before their eyes. "You run your course some time ago, Cradlebaugh," she went on. "I'll tell you something, boys; this poor fool has been trying to make love to me for a long time. He followed me one day when I was trying to find out what Heaton was up to. It was the day he claimed Bull Becker killed his horse. But it was Heaton shot his horse—to keep from having to kill him. They've been in together ever since. Cradlebaugh is as much of a spy as Heaton and Gentry, and a traitor besides."

Clay Satterfield drew his gun and stepped forward with a growl.

"Wait," Birdie cried sharply. "Don't be a fool. This fellow belongs to the Indians. You want to have them turning on us? And I've an idea that if they work on him where our friends can see the fun, it may bring 'em out. That Heaton is as big a fool as Ida May."

She turned to Quanny, who in turn addressed his followers in a few grunting sentences. Immediately the young renegades picked up the shrieking, pleading Cradlebaugh and carried him toward the sacrificial altar they had decided upon. They were a wild, mangy-looking lot, these young Indians who had turned outlaw. They were, for the most part, dirty, ragged, and unkempt. Their uncombed hair was cut off just below the neck. Few of them were twenty years of age.

Old Quanny had taught them how to sneak away from the reservation for a few months at a time to rob and kill, and when they became sated with violence they would return quietly to their reservation homes and until the blood lust struck them again be "good Indians." In this wild, desolate land, far from even a semblance of civilization, they could carry on their depredations in safety, and their present employment was exactly to their taste.

"Well, Birdie, ain't you goin' along?" Frost asked.

The woman shuddered. "I see enough of those red devils the way it is. No; I'm going to stay here. You men go on up and watch."

"Not me," Lije declared.

The other two concurred.

"Then at least spread out so that you can see if Heaton and Gentry come close," she ordered.

"Aw, hell, they've pulled out," Frost declared. "I bet we hear of 'em at Cox's Landin' in a day or so."

"On foot?" Birdie laughed. "They can't get halfway before these Indians overtake 'em. Ida May can't walk a hundred miles. Did you send word to have Ulas stay there and wait for them if they do get through?"

"Shore did," Clay answered. "Be a good joke to chase 'em clar to the

Landin' and then let Ulas pick 'em up jest when they think they're safe. Even if Ulas misses 'em, ol' Cox wouldn't dare help 'em git away."

"Take no chances on anything," Birdie said crisply. "I'd rather let Ida May get away now than let Heaton escape."

The Indians had picked up Jack Cradlebaugh and were bearing him away. His screams of entreaty fell unheeded upon the ears of the Satterfields. Presently the three brothers mounted their horses and rode away in different directions, while Birdie found herself a ravine covered with hackberry bushes, and dismounted in the shade to wait. She was just out of sight of the pulpit rock where Cradlebaugh was to be tortured, and practically out of earshot.

She had little thought for Cradlebaugh. She didn't want to hear his pleas, but she could fondly imagine that it was Val Heaton being tortured. If he were ever captured, she vowed that she would personally witness his torment. She had been a fool, she realized, to fall in love with the man; but that was exactly what she had done the first time he had kissed her. He was a fool, too. She could have made him rich.

She was sure he had never seen Ida May before. He must have risked his life to rescue her in hopes that he would be able to collect some kind of a reward. He had turned her, Birdie, down because of her eyes. What idiots men were!

At last the infernal yells of the red demons beat upon her ears. Their cruel, fiendish amusement had begun. She saw her pony prick up its ears. Then above the yells of the young bucks sounded the agonized screams of their victim.

She wished then that she had got farther away. She looked down the ravine, but there was no brush in that direction. She would just have to shut her ears to the sounds. After all Cradlebaugh had brought it on himself.

The fiendish yells of the Indians grew in intensity, and the scream of the victim correspondingly fainter. Despite her determination to be hard and unfeeling, Birdie was unable to keep from staring toward the place. Without knowing it, she was wringing her hands so hard that they would be sore for days.

Since the day she had found herself married to an outlaw and destined to be an exile the remainder of her days, she had resolved to quell every womanly impulse that might rise within her and become utterly ruthless in getting out of life everything that her peculiar environment had to offer.

She had thrown old Bull Becker into a pit and left him there to survive as best he might. She had strung Bill Gentry up by the thumbs and laughed at his misery. She had calmly given the order for Ezra Cupples to be shot down without mercy. She had made a virtual slave of Ida May, and helped to make the life of her sister-in-law, Delly, a hell on earth, and all without a qualm. But the agonized shrieks of a man being burned alive were almost more than even her barbaric spirit could endure.

She had given the order, but she realized that it would now be impossible for her to stop the torture even if she wanted to. So long as it lasted the Indians would be insane with their lust for blood. Any interference on her part would be resented and ignored. She knew to a nicety just how far her influence would extend. So far as the young bucks were concerned she had no authority over them. She could reach them only through Quanny, who knew what advantages were to be gained through association with her; but even Quanny could do only so much with his young hellions.

"Don't move, you she-devil!" a harsh voice suddenly grated upon her ears.

But Birdie did move. She whirled entirely around, her hand fumbling automatically for the sixgun at her side.

"Bull Becker!" she exclaimed.

"Go on, go on and reach for it," the old outlaw invited. "Gimme an excuse to shoot you."

"Hold it, Bull," another voice spoke,

and Birdie recognized Val Heaton. They had crept up a dry wash, and so intent had she been in looking the other way that they were not a rod from her. She wisely let go her gun.

"What do you two cheap crooks want?" she sneered.

"Enj'yin' yourself, eh, hearin' the yells of that pore devil they're roastin' up there? Why ain't you up there to see it? B' Gawd, I've a notion to shoot you through both laigs and leave you to the rattlesnakes," Becker croaked.

"And bring Quanny's Indians down on you? You won't do that," Birdie laughed harshly.

"We've got no time to quarrel, if we're to do anything for that poor cuss up yonder," Val said.

"They's only one thing we kin do," Becker said, "and I'm the one got the guts to do it. I'd like well to kill this female catamount right now, but we need her to save our own hides. You take her cross that ridge and to the edge of the thick rocks, and be ready to kiver me when you see me comin'."

"I hate to do it, but I guess it's the only way," Val said. He was thinking of the way Bull Becker hoped to save Cradlebaugh. Birdie, however, misunderstood.

"You'd better hate to do it so much that you'll let me go right now," she declared hotly. "You're surrounded. None of you can hope to get away, and if I don't have the Indians burn you, too, you'll be lucky."

Val reached for her gun. He got it—and a hard slap in the face at the same time. He caught her wrist, gave it a sharp twist that turned her around and brought a cry of pain.

"One more squawk out of you and I'll break it off," Val threatened angrily.

"Don't show her no mercy if she gits funny," Bull Becker threw back as he scrambled on up the ravine.

"You bet I won't," Val said. "If anybody'd told me a week ago there was a woman on earth as heartless as you are, I'd have told him he was a liar. Now you listen to me: If breakin' your neck would save anybody else, I won't hesitate a second about doin' it. Come on now, get going."

By twisting her arm he could force her into any action he chose, but he couldn't well control her vicious tongue.

"You idiotic fool," she said, "don't you know that this will only make things worse for you? You can't get out of those cliffs no matter what you try. You'd better give up. If Ida May marries Clay and I get my hands on Bull Becker, you and your old pardner can go."

"Oh, yeah?"

"You dirty, low-down pup, you don't have the nerve to come in fighting like a man. You had to kiss me, make love to me. Well, you'll remember that when Clay and Frost get hold of you. You'll think Quanny and his Indians are just Sunday School boys in comparison with them."

"Shut up and walk faster," he said brutally, and gave her arm a vicious twist. Thereafter, when she tried to start another tirade, he shut it off with more pressure on her arm. He didn't hate to do it, with Jack Cradlebaugh's cries ringing in his ears.

They crossed the ridge and started toward the broken face of the mesa above. They were now out of hearing of the torture save for an occasional whoop. Then, suddenly, they heard the crack of a rifle! Val hoped fervently that the shot had been fired by Becker. He twisted the arm of the woman until she broke into a run.

Birdie was breathless and sobbing with anger when they scaled a sharp raise and reached the foot of a cliff that rose twenty feet above them. She suddenly dropped to the ground, declaring her refusal to stir a foot farther. A few rods away Val could see a way to climb to the top of the cliff. He caught the woman's other arm, twisted both of them behind her, and exerted almost pressure enough to twist her arms out of their sockets. Birdie was

not the fainting kind. She screamed, but got to her feet.

"Don't," she cried wildly. "I can't stand it."

"Then keep movin', and no more damn foolishness," he gritted as he relaxed the pressure. "Git up there."

Half pushing, half lifting, he got the woman up to the top of the cliff. They could see the pulpit rock from here, and a whole panorama of action was being unfolded before their eyes.

There were no Indians left on the pulpit rock—only bound to a smoking altar, an inert figure from which came no sound. A few of the redskins were in sight, and they were headed this way. At the same moment Val heard a yell from below, and he saw one of the Satterfields ride into sight. The fellow fired three shots as a signal, and then spurred toward them.

There was a two-foot rim projecting some three feet on the very lip of the cliff. Val picked Birdie up bodily and stood her out there in plain view. He fired a shot to attract attention, then deliberately pressed the muzzle of his gun against her head.

"Your friends had better realize that I mean business," he told her grimly. "Unless Becker gets back here alive, this will be the end of Cross-Eyed Birdie."

CHAPTER XVII

Good Luck and Ill

THE sight of his wife's predicament brought Lije Satterfield to a sudden halt. Being on horseback, he was ahead of the Indians. He stopped and yelled at them, holding them up long enough for Bull Becker to disappear in the rocks like a rabbit into its burrow.

"Come on, lady," Val commanded, and once more Birdie was compelled to come along.

"Before this is over you'll crawl to me on your belly like Cradlebaugh did," she said viciously.

"Walk a little faster or I'll have to knock you out and carry you."

A few minutes later Bull Becker popped up unexpectedly above them. For the first time Birdie showed fear. "Don't let him kill me," she whimpered.

"Whether I protect you from him or not depends on you," Val told her candidly. "We need you to help make our getaway, but if you won't cooperate . . ."

Becker was acting as guide, and eventually they wound up at his hiding place. "Easier come by than where you left Idy May," he explained. "I'll take over the job of watchin' this shehellion while you go git Idy May."

"No," Birdie cried. "Don't leave me alone with him. He'll kill me."

"I don't think he will, providing you get into that cave and stay there," Val told her. "If you're hungry or thirsty you'd better get a drink before you go in and help yourself to the jerky."

"Water?" the woman exclaimed. "I thought there was no water on this end."

"Thar's plenty of it," Becker grinned. "We live right comf'able."

Bill Gentry had returned long before Val reached the other hiding place. He didn't need to tell them about Cradlebaugh, but he enjoyed their amazement when he told them that Birdie was a prisoner."

"I can't go where that woman is," Ida May said. "I just can't."

"You'll have to put up with her," Val said. "She's our best insurance for ever getting out of here."

"I'm sorry," the girl said. "I spoke without thinking."

Not until they were back at Becker's cave did Val feel altogether relieved about Birdie. He was afraid that Bull Becker might have yielded to temptation and broken her pretty neck. She heard them and came to the mouth of the cave.

"Still playing the fool I see, Ida

May. Before you're out of this you'll wish you'd have married Clay."

"Anything is better than to become the kind of woman you've turned out to be," Ida May answered quietly.

"Are *you* feeling sorry for *me?*"

"I've always felt sorry for you. Even Delly has been better off than you've been."

Birdie turned furiously and retired into the cave.

The three men realized the precariousness of their situation. A hundred miles of desert had to be crossed before they reached even doubtful safety. With Birdie as a hostage they might escape attack, but they couldn't take two women on foot across that dry, heat-ridden terrain.

"We've got to get horses," Val said, "and I'm going to get them, somehow."

It required considerable argument before they would agree to let him make the attempt alone. He was willing to allow them the palm for scouting on foot, but he believed he knew horses better than they did. If he failed, the two of them might still get Ida May to safety.

Before leaving he had a talk with Ida May. "Here's the letter and the money that I got from Ezra Cupples," he told her. "The money belongs to you. Some day it may come in useful."

She scarcely noticed the money. It was the letter which held her interest. He could see the look of disappointment on her face when she finished reading it. "I—I still don't know who I am," she said.

"Don't let it discourage you. You know you were kidnaped by Old Man Satterfield and Ezra Cupples. It'll be easy to find out where they came from, and who they had a grudge against."

"Anyway, no matter what happens, I'll never be able to repay you for all your kindness. I still can't understand why you ever tried to follow me to such a place, but I thank God that you did."

"Well, Ida May, since seeing you I'm mighty glad that I did, too." His words brought a quick blush to her cheeks.

"You mustn't trust Birdie," she said, changing the subject. "But I do feel so sorry for her. I remember when she first came to Poison Valley. She wasn't at all like she is now. At first she didn't seem to realize what sort of people the Satterfields were. Then, all of a sudden, she became cold and hard and cruel. If they were mean she showed them that she could be meaner; if they did some wild, desperate thing she would sneer at them, and make them do something even wilder and more desperate. She's like a—a person driven by an evil spirit. I honestly don't believe she's been in her right mind for years."

"The main thing is for you to keep out of her way. And if anything happens to me you can trust Bill Gentry to the limit."

"Are—are you going away?" she faltered.

"Just a little scouting. I'll be back before morning. Nothing to worry about."

"I don't know what I'd do if—if anything happened to you," she said desperately.

It was all he could do to keep from taking her in his arms. "All you need to worry about now is getting some sleep, so you'll be rested up when we leave this place—and that won't be long now," he assured her. "With Birdie along they won't dare bother us."

He sent her back to the others, then dropped off the ledge and disappeared. There was no moon and but few stars visible through the black clouds which moved across the sky like stately celestial oxen. It couldn't have been more to his liking. He was determined to get horses if he had to return to Poison Valley to do it.

He emerged from the rocks close to where he had first entered them. He had an idea that the Satterfields, owing to Birdie being a prisoner, would be camped somewhere near the foot of the mesa. He could only hope their horses

wouldn't be too close to their camp.

Once he dropped flat to the earth as he heard grunting, guttural voices. Two Indians had met almost in front of him. They separated in a few minutes, and he was soon below them.

Once assured that he was below the cordon which his enemies had thrown around that end of the mesa, he began to work around toward the place where Jack Cradlebaugh had died. It was slow, painful going, for it was necessary to pause every few rods to listen. He was glad that he had when at last he heard the faraway nicker of a horse.

The sound didn't come again, and he knew that it must have been an hour later when he again heard a horse. This time it was only a sneeze, but he knew the animal wasn't more than fifty yards away.

He crept closer, straining his eyes through the darkness to insure that he didn't put his hand down upon a Satterfield or an Indian without knowing it. A sudden snort off to his right sent a chill through him from head to heel. He grinned sheepishly but with relief as he realized it was a human snore. He was just as near to the snorer as he cared to be.

Now he could make out four horses tied in a clump of hackberry bushes just a little distance below the snorer. He could see that the animals were still saddled. His guess that the Satterfields would not return to Poison Valley that night was correct. And evidently it had not occurred to them that their enemies might come searching for them. He had to acknowledge, however, that had it not been for that fortuitous nicker he probably would never have come upon them in the dark.

Getting the horses away still presented a problem. He couldn't risk taking them all at once, and if he took just one the animal was sure to whinny. He had to try it two at a time.

The animals whistled a little when he came up to them, but he knew how to approach horses without unduly alarming them. He untied the two farthest from the sleeping men—or the men he hoped were asleep—and led them slowly down the draw for perhaps three hundred yards. He tied them there and returned for the other two. Not until he had all four animals together again did he dare to draw a long breath. He swiftly tied one horse behind another, stepped into the saddle on the one which led the poorest, and started on down the draw. At first he rode at a walk, then, convinced that he was out of hearing of the owners of the horses, he increased speed as fast as he could get the animals to lead.

He made a wide circle back almost to the entrance to Poison Valley in order to strike the trail to the mesa top which he had once traversed with Birdie. Since he saw no enemies there he concluded that he was reasonably safe. Arrived on top of the mesa, he hid the horses in a clump of piñon pine and hurried down to Becker's hide-away, less than a mile distant.

It had taken a long time to accomplish all that, and the night was nearly gone when he neared the caves. He paused to give the ground-owl signal which he and Bill Gentry used, and after a minute or so he received his answer. He scrambled down to where Gentry and Becker waited.

"Well," he said jubilantly, "I never was so lucky in my life. I've got horses, four of 'em. And left the Satterfields afoot. Call Ida May and Birdie, and let's get going."

"I reckon we'd better git goin' all right, but there's no use to call Birdie," Bill Gentry informed grimly, "because Birdie is gone."

CHAPTER XVIII

Marooned

IT TOOK Val a minute to recover from the stunning news. He had banked entirely upon Birdie for their safety. His first reaction was blind anger against the two old men for having

permitted her to escape. For the first time in their association he spoke heated words to his old pardner.

"Ease off, young feller," Becker interrupted him, "'twasn't Bill's fault, nor yit mine. If you hadn't made sech a fuss I'd of broke her damn neck long ago. Now she'll be back here with them Injuns any time."

"It was all my fault," Ida May's voice came from the darkness.

"What happened?" Val demanded.

"It was so cold there in those caves," the girl said, "and Birdie had refused to take part of my blankets. I was shivering with all of them, and I slipped into the cave where she was to put one of the blankets over her if she was asleep. Oh, it was a foolish thing to do. I, of all people, should have known how treacherous she is."

"Go on. Let's hear the worst of it," Val said.

"She was awake. She asked me to come close to her. Then, before I knew it, she was sticking me with a sharp knife."

"She yelled to us," Bill took up the tale. "Told us she'd kill Idy May if we tried to hold her. She forced the gal outside, or rather we did when Idy May told her to go ahead and use her knife. This gal was brave. We dang near had to help Birdie force her outside. We simply hadda let Birdie go or that hellcat would've killed Idy May before our eyes.

"I almost wish she had," the girl sobbed.

Val's anger ebbed. "I'm sorry I spoke like I did," he patted the girl's shoulder consolingly. "I can see how it happened, and it just couldn't be helped. So far, we're just not quite smart enough to deal with Birdie."

"Not ruthless enough, you mean," Ida May corrected.

"She made us stay here while she dragged Idy May to the end of the trail thar, then she slid over the ledge and disappeared. Time we got thar she was gone in the dark, and neither of us could find her," Bill explained.

"All I hope is she slips and breaks a laig 'fore she gits out," Becker said.

Val looked the old outlaw over contemplatively. It would be too bad for Birdie if ever she fell into Becker's hands again.

"Wal, we'd better be pullin' out 'fore Birdie rounds up her savages and sends 'em in here," Bill said. "We kin shore use them horses you got."

They reached the horses without difficulty but were still confronted with the problem of getting off the butte and getting headed for the Colorado. There was a pinkish glow in the sky which warned them that it would be daylight in half an hour. Becker told them that there was only one other way to get off the butte beside the trail to Poison Valley. That was to cross the butte in a diagonal direction to where it sloped off into a deep canyon.

"Then if they know we're up here, they can cut us off by guarding two places," Val said.

"Yeah," Becker confirmed, "but it's a chance we gotta take."

They crossed the plateau at a hard gallop, sending surprised bunches of cattle galloping off into the timber as they went. Val was pleased to note that Ida May was a good rider. The girl's face was serious but not frightened. She had faced perils before, and she could face them again.

They came suddenly to what appeared to be another break-off of the butte, only this one was abrupt. Becker flung himself from his horse and handed the reins to Val.

"Foller me," he directed, "but don't git too close."

He went on afoot, and the others followed warily. Presently Bill Gentry handed the reins of his horse to Ida May, and he went on ahead, enabling them to keep more distance between Becker and the horses.

They had turned to the right, and suddenly they found themselves looking down into a deep canyon which, Ida May informed Val, was almost opposite Poison Valley. Unlike that

depression, however, this one was narrow at the top, and wide at the bottom. Between the two was a narrow plateau not more than two miles wide. She nodded confirmation when Val guessed that they were closer to the outlaw stronghold than they had been any time that morning.

"You could ride back little more than a mile and see Delly's garden," she told him.

"Want to do it?" he queried smilingly.

She shivered. "I never want to see it again, and I never want to see any of them, unless it's Delly and her children."

They started the sharp descent through rocks and timber, always keeping the figure of Bill Gentry in sight, and they were frequently halted for minutes at a time by Bill's signal. With time so precious, Val thought fretfully, there was little sense in Becker being so cautious.

They reached what seemed to be the bottom of the canyon. High slopes towered above them, shutting off their view, but there was a well defined trail at the bottom over which hundreds of stolen animals had no doubt been driven. The canyon was too crooked for them to see at any time more than a few hundred yards ahead. Bill's upraised hand kept stopping them more and more often.

Suddenly, while they were waiting for Bill's come ahead sign, the silence was shattered by a single wild yell. Val didn't wait to get Bill's permission, but tossed the reins of the horse he was leading to Ida May and spurred forward.

Just around the first bend he came upon the two old-timers. They were standing over the body of a dead Indian, whose skull had been shattered by the butt of Becker's rifle. The fierce old outlaw chief was gazing on down the canyon.

"The critter seen me before I could nail him, and let out that whoop," he explained apologetically. "We better wait right here a few minutes to see if his war-whoop brings any more Injuns. If it don't, I reckon we kin rattle our hocks."

Val dismounted and hurriedly dragged the dead Indian out of sight before Ida May arrived. The girl only paled slightly when they told her what had happened.

"Wal, I reckon the critter musta been alone, so let's be goin'," Becker said. He and Gentry now climbed aboard their horses, and set as fast a pace as the steep nature of the canyon permitted. Val realized that only the caution of the two older men had saved them from disaster. That lone Indian might have held them up for hours.

Two or three miles farther on they came to where the canyon forked in three directions. The face of another mighty mesa loomed before them, but one canyon ran north, and another south. They had been traveling straight west. They turned south.

It was not really a canyon in which they soon found themselves but merely a division between two immense plateaus. At the end of five miles they emerged onto the edge of the badlands which lay between them and the Colorado.

The country ahead of them looked almost level, but in reality it was a series of bare, round ridges with deep washes between them, where the erosions of centuries had worn out deep gullies and washes. All of them ran down to the Dirty Devil like the bare white ribs of a cadaver, and all of them had to be crossed. Each time they rode over a ridge they might be seen from miles away.

"Thar you are," Bull Becker told them. "Ninety miles of that and you'll reach Cox's Landin'. Happens to be the right kind of people thar, you'll be safe. Happens to be a gang of Satterfield outlaws, and you'd jest as well ride right back to Poison Valley. You don't wanta look fer no help from Rube Cox. He's the neutralest hombre ever tuk a chaw of terbacker."

"Well, folks, I guess we'd just as well make a run for it," Val decided. "We'll only be giving them time to organize if we delay.

Ninety miles! It would be plain hell merely crossing that country, but if they had to dodge pursuit, or fight their way through, it would be worse.

It was already beginning to get hot, but they put their mounts to a mile-eating trot wherever they could. Most of the canyons were too steep for them to go straight up or down, so they had to angle and frequently zigzag. Their progress seemed pitifully slow, yet the mesa was beginning to recede in a blue haze by the time they stopped to let their horses rest. Already it was evident it would have been impossible to make the journey on foot.

They stopped in a clump of scraggly brush that afforded a trifling amount of shade, and allowed their mounts to graze on the dead sparse grass. There was no water, and the animals had to be watched constantly lest they suddenly strike out for the distant river.

Bill Gentry went back on the highest ridge to watch the back-trail. He was gone not longer than twenty minutes when he returned hurriedly.

"They're after us," he reported. "There's smoke signals goin' up all over the country, clear back to the breaks."

"Chances are they'll press us hard with their horses, and git us to make a stand if they kin, while them savages cut between us and the river and git in behind," Becker said.

"If I hadn't let Birdie outwit me, none of us would be in danger now," Ida May said contritely. "I'm to blame for everything."

They assured her that she was not.

There was little talking. It was Val who set the pace, because his judgment of horseflesh was sound. He didn't believe that the outlaws would attack before dark. He tried to go fast enough that the flanking Indians would not be able to gain any in the race, yet easy enough that the horses would not wilt completely under the hot afternoon sun.

When darkness came at last it was all they could do to keep their weary mounts moving. Only one thing was in their favor. From an hour before sunset dark, heavy clouds had been hovering over the western horizon, and they seemed to be gathering and advancing. Once in a while they caught the ominous growl of thunder. There would probably be no moon. Anyway, the intense heat was broken.

"Once them cloudbursts ketches us in a washout, it'll be too bad," Becker said. "I've seen her rain so hard every gully was bank deep."

"If it stops us it'll stop them," Val retorted. "Let her rain."

An hour later it began to rain. The sky seemed to open and the water was dumped out. They dared not stay in a wash, so they had to stand and take it on top of one of the ridges. Val draped a blanket around Ida May's shoulders, but it was quickly soaked. Lightning flashed and revealed rivulets of water even on top of the bare ridges. The horses turned their rumps to the storm and waited with heads hanging to the ground.

In five minutes the whole party was chilled, but in general they were thankful for the storm. Certainly it couldn't make their position any worse.

"Wonder how Birdie likes it?" Bill Gentry called out as soon as the storm abated enough that he could make himself heard. At that moment there came a terrific, jagged flash of lightning that for a moment illuminated the ridge below them like day.

There, not two hundred yards below them, was a party of horsemen, likewise with their backs to the storm. On either side of them they could hear the roaring sound of running water tearing down the washes. They were marooned for the time being upon this bare, narrow ridge with at least half a dozen of their foes. And it was certain to become lighter before the water went down enough for them to cross.

CHAPTER XIX

The Colorado

MINUTE after that blinding flash of lightning the fugitives were engulfed in stygian darkness. Val put out his hand to touch the girl's arm comfortingly. Not once had she uttered a word of complaint, despite the incredible hardships she had endured. He felt her cold, wet hand placed over his reassuringly for a moment, and then it was withdrawn.

Another flash of lightning, farther away and less brilliant, did not afford enough light to reveal their enemies—but it did reveal an empty saddle close at hand. Bull Becker was gone!

Scarcely had Val's subdued exclamation left his lips when the blare of a rifle momentarily drowned the steady patter of the rain. Hoarse cries. More shots. Powder flashes crisscrossed the black page of night.

Val dared not leave Ida May lest he lose her completely, and he couldn't take her with him into battle. He heard Bill Gentry's horse moving toward the conflict. In the darkness a stray shot might reach anybody. He got the girl's bridle and led her as close as they could get to the raging torrent in the gulley bottom. The gun flashes revealed that Satterfield bunch were fleeing on down the ridge. Soon the firing ceased altogether.

The rain stopped suddenly. Came a queer unusual sound, that of torrents of water tearing down previously dry gulches filled the air. As the clouds lifted a few stars began to appear. The air was damp and chilly. In another hour the freshets would have gone down enough to make crossing possible.

Val heard Bill Gentry calling his name, and answered. "What happened?" he demanded when Gentry joined them.

"Looks like Becker went off his nut again," Bill said. "I don't know what became of him. They may have got him for all I know, but I stumbled over a dead man. It was Frost Satterfield."

"Oh!" Ida May exclaimed.

"So he got one of 'em?" Val mused.

"Dunno whether I shoulda done it or not, but I drug the body over and throwed it in the flood. If Frost's bones are ever found they'll be somewhere down in the Colorado."

The thing gave them a strange feeling. No one cared to talk. Death had dogged their footsteps ever since their escape, and they knew it was not yet shaken off.

It began to grow lighter; the rumble of the rushing waters decreased. Still there was no sign of Bull Becker. They couldn't afford to wait for the ex-outlaw. That summer cloudburst had been providential, and they could not neglect the opportunity it afforded them, even though it meant the abandonment of one of their party.

"I'll stay and wait for him," Bill Gentry had volunteered, but the other two vetoed it. They owed Becker nothing, and if he had got into trouble it was his own fault.

They forced the reluctant animals into the receding flood and got across. The water was little more than knee deep, but the sucking mud underneath gripped the animals' feet like mire. The cooling off had done the horses good, but they had to cross one freshet after another. Soon they found only trickles of water, but each gully was filled with that sticky, stinking mud. Thirsty as their animals were, they could not drink the thick liquid in the washes. Later, there would be depressions holding water which had settled and which could be drunk.

There was little use to maneuver now, since their tracks were plainly visible in the mud. They could only hope to beat as straight a course as possible to the big river, and hope that the storm had delayed the Indians.

With morning they found a low pinnacle on a ridge which afforded

shelter for the horses while the two men climbed to its top to survey the back trail. They still had water in the goatskin bag Bill had captured, and food enough for the circumstances. According to the best estimate they could make, they were not over thirty miles from the Colorado. Their horses were in far better shape than they had been the evening before.

There was no question but that the mud in the gullies would slow up the Indians who were on foot. Their chief danger was from Birdie and her men, and their chief worry the fate of Bull Becker. They rested for an hour, but still saw no sign of pursuit. Fatigue had laid a heavy hand on all of them, but there was no use to think of rest until their journey was over.

They found Ida May seated upon a rock watching the horses. Her face was drawn and there were circles under her eyes, but she managed a smile of greeting.

"Feel able to go on?" Val asked.

"Oh, yes! I'm rested and feel fine," she declared.

"Well, there's no sign of Becker or anybody else, so we'd as well ride on," Val said.

"I hope they haven't caught him," she cried.

"Don't worry; that old galoot kin take keer of himself," Bill said. "Anyway, he's got too much sense to let Birdie or them Injuns git hold of him alive."

Leading the extra horse behind them, they struck out on the last lap of the journey. They discovered that the storm had struck only across a certain belt, and they were soon beyond the mud. The main idea now was to get as far as they could before the heat became intolerable.

After a couple of hours, seeing no sign of pursuit, they slowed down to a jog trot. The conformation of the country had now changed, and the slope was southwest rather than east. The canyons were deeper, and they knew they were approaching the Colorado itself. They missed Bull Becker sorely, for he could have guided them to their destination with the least possible loss of time. But once they were down into one of those mighty canyons they had no fear of being cut off, at least until they reached their destination.

There was a dull, booming roar that at first sounded like a distant stampede of a herd of cattle, but which presently grew louder than the noise any cattle could make. It began to sound like the incessant *boom, boom, boom* of dozens of gigantic drums. It was the river!

Ahead of them huge parapets of red sandstone swept majestically, tier upon tier. These were on the other side of the river and looked to be only two or three miles away. All one could see in any direction was red sandstone.

They came out suddenly upon a flat-topped bench, and realized with a thrill not entirely due to relief that they were at last in the canyon of the mighty Colorado itself. There it was—the great mud-colored river, caught forever in the grip of the channel it had forged for itself. Scare a hundred miles below was the beginning of the greatest canyon on earth.

"There she roars," Bill Gentry said. "She isn't in no mild mood today either. I wish I knew whether that crossin' was above us or below."

"We'd better be findin' out," Val said. "Haven't you ever been here before, Ida May?"

"Not that I can remember. In fact I know I haven't. But I do know that the Satterfields often come here, and they must have friends. I—I'm frightened."

"You're all in," Val told her. "You've got to get some place where you can get some decent food and some sleep."

The difficulty they experienced getting off the bench indicated that they had not come by the route used by the outlaws. It gave cause for worry, lest they had been beaten to the crossing after all.

Finally, just before they reached the river, they saw a triangular cove up-

stream, and near the upper end was a little cluster of buildings.

"This man Cox may be frien'ly to the Scatterfields, but he also has to keep on good terms with other people. He won't dare let them bandits come in here and take over his place," Bill stated.

"You're right," Val agreed. "Anyway, we headed for Cox's Landin', and if we have to take the place over ourselves we will."

They rounded the point of a massive bluff and were soon in the little triangular cove upon which Cox had long ago established his trading post and ferry. It was a mighty relief to know that they were once more in the channels of civilization, no matter how remote.

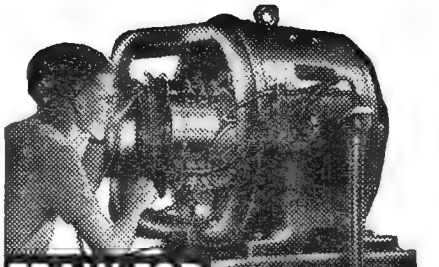
Despite Ida May's bravery her face was ashen from fatigue. Val was glad to see new hope spring into her eyes. Everything about her was suddenly tense and eager. He realized that until they brought Cox's Landing into sight she hadn't dared let herself hope. He reached over and patted her hand.

"Everything's going to be all right," he assured her.

She turned toward him gratefully. "Oh, I hope so," she said in a low voice. "But I can't forget that poor Ezra Cupples was murdered by those people just when we thought we were perfectly safe."

"It won't happen this time," he said. "Cupples was only one man, and he may have got careless because he thought he was safe. This is a quiet enough looking place."

The trading post consisted of a row of cabins backed against the bluff, with one larger building slightly out in front of the others. The ferry, moored to its cables, was a few hundred yards down the river bank. Here was no regular road; only the converging point of half a dozen desert trails over which roamed hardy cowboys, miners, outlaws and Indians.



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Val was secretly a little uneasy as he saw three or four blanketed Indians lounging about the trading post, though they didn't seem the type of Quanny's young savages.

The party stopped in front of the main trading post, and Val helped the girl out of the saddle. He felt a pang of pity for the great weariness which no effort on her part could conceal. He was dead tired himself in spite of an iron physique and a body that he had trained to endure hardships.

The blanketed Indians stared silently. The whole place seemed unnaturally quiet. As they stepped into the low-roofed building, heavy with the odor of musty groceries, a man rearranging goods upon a shelf looked around and came toward them. Val, accustomed to overlooking no detail, wondered why the man had become so active in rearranging that particular spot, when the dust on the shelves indicated that the most of the articles upon them had not been moved for months.

"Well, folks, what can I do for you?" the man smirked.

He was rather an odd-looking character, with a big bald head surrounded by a fringe of reddish hair. His eyes were the smallest Val had ever seen in a human head, and his nose was a mere blob upon which was a growth of coarse, reddish hairs. His mouth was slack and discolored with tobacco, and his big shoulders were so muscular that at first glance he seemed badly stooped, almost deformed.

"You Mr. Cox?" Val asked.

"That's me. Rube Cox. Which way you from?"

"We were headin' for the Escalante, but we lost our outfits and headed back this way because we heard it was the closest post."

"Well, ain't another tradin' post closer'n a hundred and fifty miles, I reckon. What can I do for you?"

"First, we had a hard time and we need rest. We'd like to get a hot meal,

and then we want a room for the young lady. She's very tired."

"Looks it. Fact is, you all do," Cox grinned. "Come with me."

As he led the way to the back half a dozen dirty, ragged brown urchins scampered out of the way. The jovial Cox tweaked the ears of those he could catch.

"Mary!" he bellowed as he stopped in front of what obviously was his own domicile.

A slatternly woman, not much more than half the age of the proprietor, slouched forward with a ten-month-old baby astride her hip.

"Mrs. Cox," the man with the double purpose of giving her orders and making the visitors acquainted with her, "we have guests. Fix 'em a good meal and put the young lady up in the spare bedroom."

"All right, it won't take me long," the woman said indifferently.

"Maybe you men would like a little drink while the wife's fixin' supper," Cox suggested.

"Right good idee," Bill Gentry agreed.

They had a big drink which made them feel better. They found Cox had no horse feed, but he did have a pasture into which they could turn their animals.

Knowing they would have to remain there overnight, Val laid his cards on the table.

"The Satterfields, eh?" Cox rumbled. "I've heard of 'em. Possible I've ferried 'em across the river, but out here I make it a point not to ask questions of nobody. It jest don't pay."

"I can see that," Val admitted.

"Well, you jest rest easy. If anybody comes lookin' for you, I'll tell 'em no such people have been here. All you need do is keep out of sight."

"All right. Can you arrange to get us what supplies we need and be ready to ferry us across the river an hour before daybreak in the morning?"

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5.25-17	2.45	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.45	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.80	1.15
5.50-17	2.75	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.75	1.15
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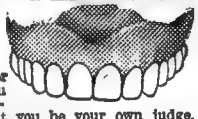

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"Sure can," Cox agreed. "And there's the signal your supper's ready."

They were too tired and hungry to bother about Mrs. Cox's ideas of sanitation, and there was certainly abundant food. Before the meal was over Ida May was nodding like a sleepy child. They told her to get as much rest as she could.

"I know I'll be asleep before I can get my boots off," she smiled drowsily.

"You sure she'll be all right here?" Val demanded.

"Of course. You fellows want one of the cabins?"

Val nodded. The cabin was perhaps a hundred feet from the house. But when they were inside Bill Gentry said, "You get all the shuteye you can, Val, because I'm goin' to mosey back along the trail and make my bed where I kin hear the Satterfields if they come in. You keep close to the girl."

Val's argument against the move was feeble. It seemed like sound strategy. They did not really expect the Satterfields to molest them here, but it was as well to have one man on guard, and Bill could get some sleep anyway.

Val was asleep before he knew it. It was pitch dark inside the cabin when he awoke. For some reason he had a panicky inclination to yell. He had the feeling that something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

After a moment he felt cautiously for the sixgun under his pillow. It was still there. Breathing more freely, he sat up and silently drew on his boots. He felt that his alarm was unjustified, but just the same, now that he was awake he meant to have a look around the place. He walked over to the door and tried to open it. It didn't open. He tried again, hard this time. There was no doubt about it, that door was locked from the outside!

He still had his gun. That meant that he had been locked in by somebody other than the Satterfields. It seemed clear, however, that Cox had treacher-

ously locked him in with the idea of holding him for the Satterfields. If the man thought he could be held that easily, he was mistaken.

Then another thought brought all his apprehensions back again. Ida May! Had they got hold of the girl and taken her away while he slept?

He had to get out of there! He lighted a match and found a smoky lantern. Every window in the cabin was too small to permit the passage of a man's body. He turned to the door. It obviously was padlocked on the outside. He placed the muzzle of his gun against the wood and fired five rapid shots. He reloaded rapidly, listening while he worked. There was complete silence. He fired three more shots, then threw his weight against the weakened bolt which held the hasp. At the third effort the bolt broke loose and the door flew open.

Those eight shots should have roused somebody, but only complete silence greeted his ears. He thrust in three fresh cartridges and ran toward the house. The doors apparently were not locked. He entered, struck a match and made his way to the door of the room Ida May was supposed to occupy. He knocked as the match burned out, but got no answer.

"Ida May!" he called. "Ida May! Answer!" Still there was no reply. He struck another match and flung the door open. The bed was empty. The girl was gone!

(To be continued in the next issue)

The Unknown Pioneer

A TRAGIC tale of a pioneer who perished in a small stone barricade at the hands of hostile Indians was revealed in Idaho by two men who discovered the skeleton in the still-standing fort at the top of a large butte not far from Challis.

These two men were prospecting on the butte when they discovered the small, waist-high wall of stones. Inside was the skeleton of a man, an old-fashioned powder horn, a solid ivory powder measure, the stock of an old flintlock rifle, two leather pouches, one containing a number of shaped pieces of flint, a small piece of cloth and a number of buttons and other articles. There were also several Indian arrowheads within the enclosure.

The stock of the gun was well preserved on one side, but the other was badly pitted. The butt and the trigger guard are of the old elaborate type. The gun barrel was not found.

The prospectors reported that the leather pouches crumbled under their touch, but the piece of cloth was so well preserved it can be unraveled thread by thread.

The skeleton of the man indicates he was of large stature, and although some of the bones were missing the skull and most of the major bones were intact.

Many persons have hazarded guesses as to the cause, time and exact manner in which the man came to his death, but in all probability this will remain one of the unreadable pages in Idaho history. Since the weapon was of flintlock design, it apparently dated from trapper or early pioneer times.

—*Glen Perrins*

"Poor Sam! I just remembered we weren't playing for money."

OUT OF THE

with Tex

Editor's note: *Tex Sherman, who gives you rodeo news hot off the griddle, is personally acquainted with performers and producers from coast to coast. Have you any question you'd like answered about any particular rodeo or contestant? Write Tex Sherman in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York. Be sure to enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope, and Mr. Sherman will send you a prompt reply.*

The rodeo's on, folks. Here they come, "Out of the Chutes" and into the arena, Tex Sherman announcing!

HISTORY was made recently in a calf-roping contest between Bob Crosby of Roswell and George Weir of Lovington, N. M. Crosby never missed a loop on his quota of ten calves and won with a total time of 257 seconds or an average of 25 seconds per calf. Some roping, Bob! Bob is the only permanent holder of the Roosevelt trophy, having won it for three years in succession. They say there were plenty of side bets on this contest, the bets amounting to, according to one figure I heard, over fifteen thousand dollars. At this same contest Joe Welch defeated Walter Page on ten calves too.

The Orange Bowl rodeo at Miami, Fla., turned out to be the first successful rodeo ever held in that city. One of the biggest thrills ever given to Florida visitors was handed out by two big Brahma bulls which escaped from the Bowl and decided to see the city. Chased by kids on bicycles, police on motorcycles and squad cars, the bulls raced toward the Twelfth Street bridge. An officer fired several shots into one of the bulls, whereupon the other took refuge in a yard. One officer decided to walk toward this one, but changed his mind as the critter took after him. The officer landed up a tree, and the bull, eventually roped by a cowboy, landed back in the Orange Bowl. The wounded animal had to be destroyed.

Jerry Lee did a great job of arena direct-

CHUTES

Sherman

ing this show with Steve Rains his assistant. Larry Sunbrock did his own announcing, and put plenty of pep into it. In spite of a different earlier report, the stock for the show was furnished by Odes Cowert of Center Hill, Fla. He furnishes stock for most of the Florida shows.

The only accident was suffered by Hugh Ridley, the well known calf-roper. While he was chasing calves down the arena his horse slipped on the slick grass, rolling over on Hugh and breaking his leg. Though the leg is now in a cast, Hugh claims he'll be in shape for the big summer shows.

At the Fiesta de los Vaqueros held in Tuscon in February, the first three days of the show were an Indian rodeo. Indians from various reservations near Tuscon came to town and competed. This year, as in the past, the sheriffs' steer-roping contest was held. The name of the winner hasn't arrived yet, but last year this was won by Ed Echols, sheriff of Phoenix, hands down.

Toots Mansfield, one of our favorite calf-ropers, and Mary Nell Edwards were married last December at Big Springs, Texas, the home of the bride. In 1939 Mrs. Mansfield was chosen one of the six girls to appear at the rodeo in Madison Square Garden. Her folks are well known ranchers in the Big Springs country, so Toots will be kept busy herding cows when not off grabbing prizes.

Montgomery, Ward & Co. of Chicago plan to hold their second annual rodeo at the Will Rogers Memorial Coliseum at Fort Worth. This will be in competition with the Fat Stock Show Rodeo annually held in North Fort Worth, called by the cowboys "Cowtown." All members of the 4-Hi clubs will see the show free as the guests of Montgomery, Ward. The company is not expecting to make money from the show, and it's doubtful if they'll get many top-hands, because the prize money will probably be less than that at the Fat Stock Show, who are planning to go to town this year.

From C. A. Studer, secretary of the Southwest Rodeo Ass'n, comes word that Tex Doyle was found dead in a tourist camp at Grand Junction, Colo. Doyle was rated one of rodeo's top-hands, and his death must be regretted by all who knew him. The local coroner described his death as a suicide; he had often threatened to take his life.

Tex is survived by his wife and one son, Jimmie, and a sister, Mrs. Jay Cudd of Borger, Texas. Pampa, Texas, was his home town. After he won the title of champion bulldogger, Tex decided to retire from the rodeo game. He bulldogged his first steer at the Anvil Park Rodeo at Canadian, Texas. At the time of his death he was punching cows for an outfit near Grand Junction.

Among the interesting bits of news that have reached me lately: Shorty Kirdendall and his wife, the former Mary Carter, are now living in El Reno, Okla. Mary is running their gas station, while Shorty is breaking horses for the Government. A good will caravan has gone out of Fort Worth and is covering the State in the interests of the Fat Stock Show and Rodeo there. Rock Parker, an Arizona cowboy during the winter months, is fighting in the ring. Last year, out of twenty-three fights, he delivered twenty-two knockouts. This reminds us that Blackie Russell is another cowboy who made good in the ring. The rodeo photographer, R. R. (Dub) Doubleday, is hitting the Texas and Arizona rodeos, where his pictures are in great demand. Dub's home town is Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

amateur page

Editor's Note—*This page is made up from contributions of readers. On it we shall publish original pieces of cartoons or verse or prose. The only requirements are that the persons submitting material be amateurs, and that the contributions be such as will appeal to people interested in the West and in Western stories. For each contribution published we will send the writer (or artist, if it is a cartoon) two dollars. Each person may submit more than one contribution.*

Address all contributions to RANCH ROMANCES' Amateur Page, 515 Madison Avenue, New York City. All submissions will be considered. No submissions will be returned, nor can we enter into correspondence about your contributions. Remember—and this is important—all material must be original with the person submitting it, and not copied from anything else.

Western Valor

RIDE, for the lightning flashes
And the longhorns mill in fear,
Hold, while your pony dashes
From the path of a maddened steer.
Ride, for the fright is on them,
They bolt in a mad stampede,
Ride, for you cannot calm them,
Rowel your frantic steed.

Shout a farewell to your comrade
Over the thunder and din,
And in case you ever have done bad
It's time to repent of your sin.
Now ride, for you're out in the middle,
And you know there's a cliff at the bend,
And the life that you thought was a riddle
In a moment must come to an end.

This was the code of the battle
In the West of an era past,
You must ride to your death with the cattle
You must stick with the herd till the last.

J. A. Sheridan, Marquette, Mich.

Law for Lamar

DAVE LANDRY paused in his stride as the sound of a girl's angry voice came to his ears.

"Get out of my shop, Nick Crawford, and stay out. When I want your advice concerning my editorial policy, I'll ask for it!"

"Listen, you little fool. I run this town and the sooner you get that into your pretty head, the better off you'll be. You ease up and quit printing all that rubbish about me, or else—"

"Or else you'll have me murdered like you did my uncle!" retorted the girl.

"Damn you, I'll teach you—"

Dave jerked open the door of the Lamar *Chronicle* print shop and stepped inside. With his back to the door stood a tall, broad-shouldered man who had just captured the wrists of a slender, brunette girl. The girl faced him defiantly, her dark eyes smoldering, although her small oval face appeared to be somewhat pale. Neither of the couple heard Dave's entrance.

"The lady said to beat it!"

The girl ceased struggling and cast a startled glance toward Dave. Nick Crawford whirled sharply, released the girl. He was not a bad looking man. He had regular features, but there was a certain furtiveness about the manner in which his gray eyes flitted over Dave's lean, well muscled figure, a wolfish expression in his face which Dave did not like.

"Who the hell are you?" Crawford snapped. His lips drew back in a half snarl and there was fury in his voice.

"Who I am doesn't matter," replied Dave. "You'd better take your carcass somewhere else before I happen to remember that you tried to get rough with this girl."

"Why, you damned nosy saddle tramp!" exploded Crawford. His right hand shot inside his coat, underneath his left arm.

Dave hardly seemed to change positions as he drew the .44 which rode low on his muscular thigh, but the gun appeared in his fist before Crawford could whip out his weapon.

"I wouldn't try that if I was you," advised Dave. His brown eyes bored coldly into the gray ones of Nick Crawford. Nick slowly withdrew his hand, minus the gun. A look of incredulity was upon his face. Never before had he been beaten to the draw.

He turned to the girl. "You'll be hearing from me again," he said and slammed out.

Dave looked at the girl. She was still standing where she had been when he interrupted the rough tactics of Nick Crawford. In her eyes lingered a trace of fear and her tiny figure still quivered with emotion. A smile suddenly trembled around her mouth. "Thanks for the assistance, stranger, but I'd better warn you that you've made a bad enemy. Nick Crawford is a dangerous man and he doesn't care how he gets what he wants. He practically runs this town. The only law here is a marshal, and Nick gives him his orders."

"Things will be different from now on," said Dave. "I'm the new deputy from the county seat and I'll be giving the orders."

The girl's eyes sparkled. "Then you're staying in Lamar! I'm glad. I'll feel much safer with you— That is," she added hurriedly as the color stole into her cheeks, "I'll feel much safer now that I know we have a straight peace officer."

Dave grinned. "Thanks," he said. "Sheriff Maxwell sent me over to clean up the town and protect the citizens. I sure am glad he did because I'm liking the job already!"

Mary Sheffield, Denver, Colo.

Return of the Redman

OH fair Oklahoma, once land of the Indian!
Gone is the tepee beside the clear stream;
Gone is the pinto on green prairies roving;
Gone is the land of the Indian's dream.

The buffalo long since has passed from the picture,
But still on the prairie his wallows are seen;
The buffalo grass is still verdant in springtime;
The cottonwood's white limbs are covered with green.

The sun that once shone on the camp of the redman,
Now gleams on the skyscrapers' towering heights;
The wind that blew free over hilltop and valley
Shrieks 'round the tall buildings and bright city lights.

Gone is the freedom the Indian treasured,
Freedom to roam where the hunting was best.
Children of Nature, the Great Spirit led them
To north or to south, to east or to west.

The white man is just. The white man makes laws.
Come has the white man, gone is the savage.
The white man builds roads and towering structures;
The hills and the forests the white man must ravage.

Oh fair Oklahoma, once land of the Indian!
When darkness falls over your capitol's dome,
When black clouds roll up with deafening thunder,
When lightning strikes swift, and cyclones lay waste,
Does the soul of the redman return then, I wonder?
Does the soul of the Indian return to his home?

Bess Rogers, Oklahoma City, Okla.

"Come back, dear! It's wagging its tail."

James G. Wals, Rhinelander, Wisc.

Lament of a Roamin' Ranny

OH, 'twas up in old Wyomin',
I was jest a wanderin', roamin',
When I met a little Irish gal named Jane.
Now we loved to beat the band,
But her dad gives me the can,
'Cause I didn't have a copper to my name.

Oh, 'twas up in old Montany,
I was still a roamin' ranny,
When I met a gal whose papa owned a ranch.
Now I owned my boots and saddle,
But not a livin' head of cattle,
So the lady said I didn't have a chance.

Now this is how I figgers—
They're a couple of gold diggers,
And the funny part is—I don't give a dang!
In my happy, roamin' life
I don't need a purty wife,
Jest my spurs, boots, saddle, and mustang.

June Russell, Kingfisher, Okla.

OUR AIR MAIL

"Our Air Mail" has for years been running between readers of Ranch Romances and has enabled many people to make worth-while friends. You may write DIRECTLY to anyone whose letter is printed in this department. Remember that all letters should reflect the clean, wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances and contain nothing objectionable. The addresses given are complete. If no country is mentioned, it is the U. S. A.

This department is intended only for those who actually wish correspondents. We ask you therefore to refrain from using it as a medium for playing jokes and particularly request you do not sign your letters with other people's names. Address letters for publication to "Our Air Mail," 515 Madison Ave., New York.

Lonesome George

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely old man forty-three years old. I am recovering from a fall in which I broke six bones in my foot, and I would surely love to hear from some pen pals from my part of the country. I am a loyal reader of RANCH ROMANCES and very much enjoy your stories.

GEORGE R. RODES.

c/o Jay Bricker,
R. F. D. № 1,
Salem, Ohio

A Licensed Pilot

Dear Editor:

I am an ex-soldier, twenty-two years old, who wishes very much to correspond with girls and boys of near my age. I can tell of Hawaii and Panama, as I have served in the U. S. Air Corps at both places. I also hold a private pilot's license. So please, all of you pen pals, write to me.

DELBERT STEVENS.

c/o B. R. Reeves,
Speigner, Ala.

They Live on the Santa Fe Trail

Dear Editor:

We're just a couple of lonely Kansas girls, sixteen and fifteen, who would like to have some pen pals from anywhere and of any age, both girls and boys. Ruth has dark hair and brown eyes, and Doris, blond hair and blue eyes. We live near Pawnee Rock, the famous rock monument where the Indians attacked a wagon train on the Old Santa Fe Trail. Please don't disappoint us, pen pals.

RUTH SCHRODER,
DORIS SCHRODER.

R. R. 3,
St. John, Kans.

Fishing Enthusiast

Dear Editor:

I'm a farmerette of twenty living miles from nowhere who would like some real pen friends. My favorite hobbies are fishing and amateur photography. I'll gladly exchange snapshots.

CLARA CROMWELL

Harmony, Me.

Girl Motorcyclist

Dear Editor:
I live in the nation's capital and own my own motorcycle. I've had lots of cycling fun and would like to correspond with others who go in for the same sport. I am 23 years old, blonde, and weigh 100 pounds. Let's get together and exchange motorcycle news.

EDITH BROCK

541 Irving St., N.W.,
Washington, D. C.

Montana Radio Operator

Dear Editor:
I am out in the state of Montana as a radio operator, although my home is in Pennsylvania. I have traveled quite a lot in the United States, and have several hobbies. I like boxing, hunting, fishing, swimming, dancing and skating, and I am nineteen years old. I'm wishing for lots of mail, for I have plenty of time to answer letters.

WILLIAM ECKERT

Station WUBL
Fort Missoula, Mont.

From the Tall Timber

Dear Editor:
I am a lumber worker up here in the mountains of Colorado and would like to hear from pen pals everywhere. My hobbies are photography and stamp collecting. I should like to hear especially from redheads, but all others are welcome.

HARRY LUSK

c/o San Isabel Lodge,
Rye, Colo.

Lonesome Draftee

Dear Editor:
I am one of the thousands of fellows taken into the U. S. Army service last September. My home is in Chicago, and I am very lonely here in Texas. I have eight months more to serve, and I'd appreciate some pen pals greatly.

JOHN GUTHRIE

202 Coast Art., Medical Dept.,
Ft. Bliss, Texas.

Fortune Teller

Dear Editor:
I am a seventeen-year-old girl whose favorite hobbies are foreign correspondence and fortune telling. I specialize in palmistry. All you who want your fortunes told, just write a letter to me. Other interests are sports, especially hiking and riding. I'm interested in hearing from you boys and girls all over, especially foreign lands.

LOIS LLOYD

Box 11, Palmero, Calif.

Friendly Neighbor

Dear Editor:
I am a Japanese-Canadian eighteen years old, and since I get lonely at times I'd like to have pen pals from all over the world. I like all outdoor sports, belong to a club, and play in a football team and baseball team.

MAS MURAKAMI

P. D. Box 618,
New Westminster, B. C., Canada.

Calling Shut-Ins

Dear Editor:
As I am a shut-in and have been for seven years, I would like to have some pen pals. I would appreciate hearing from shut-ins and invalids. I am 46 years of age, but ages of writers would make no difference to me.

JAMES CAPPELLO

c/o St. John's Sanitarium,
Springfield, Ill.

Three Señoritas

Dear Editor:
We are three Spanish girls who have read the Double R for a number of years. Now that we are shut-ins, we decided to take advantage of the Air Mail Dept. to make friends. We are 19, 18 and 17 respectively.

MADGE VASQUEZ
JO IRENE LUNA
LILLYANNA RENTERIA

Ward 106,
Olive View, Calif.

China Dog Collector

Dear Editor:
I am a girl of sixteen and a junior in high school. My favorite hobby is collecting china dogs. My others are swimming, skating, bicycle riding and tennis. I would like to correspond with people between the ages of 16 and 25.

RUTH PINE

1204 So. Broadway,
Wichita, Kans.

From the Grand Coulee

Dear Editor:
I am a thirteen-year-old girl who has lived at the Grand Coulee Dam for five years. I can tell many interesting things. I like all sports, music and school work. I would like to hear from boys and girls from all parts of the world.

PEGGY AUSTIN

Box 32,
Burien, Wash.

Good Pals

Dear Editor:
Here are two young fellows sending in an S.O.S. for pen pals. We are not brothers, just good pals. We have traveled together extensively, having been in Mexico, Canada and the Hawaiian Islands together. Herb has a private pilot's license and Eddie has a transport pilot's license.

EDWARD FERGUSON
HERBERT WISEHART

55 Oxford Ave.,
Ft. Logan, Colo.

From Sunny Bermuda

Dear Editor:
I am a girl of fifteen and would like to have many pen pals, boys and girls. My hobbies are dancing, writing, tennis and playing the piano. If anyone cares to write to me, I'll tell them about Bermuda and exchange snapshots.

FRANCES GIBBONS

Sunny Bank, Warwich East,
Bermuda

Army Bandman

Dear Editor:
I am in the Army now, and I would like to have pen pals from all over the world. I play a tenor sawophone in the Army band, and I like all outdoor sports.

P. F. C. MARION FRANDSEN

Band Co., 116 Engineers,
Camp Murray, Wash.

Lonely Mother

Dear Editor:

I am a married woman and have, until recently, had very little time to get lonesome. Last June I lost my only daughter in an auto accident; my oldest son married; and my youngest son now leaves for camp as a National Guardsman. I would love to gain a friend in each state and in foreign countries also. They can be from ten to a hundred years old, married or single. Perhaps there are some lonely young girls or boys who would like a pen mother.

MRS. R. A. STONER

508 Sierra Ct.,
Ontario, Calif.

Bona Fide Homesteader

Dear Editor:

I'm a high school girl who lives in New Mexico. try to answer all letters. Come on, you broncspond with cowboys and cowgirls especially, but will try to answer all letters. Come on, you broncpeelers and young cowgirls, rope me in with replies!

RUBY CARR

Frazier, N. M.

New Zealanders, Please Read

Dear Editor:

Can you help me? Last year I corresponded with a girl in New Zealand, but, unfortunately, I have lost her address. At that time I was stationed at Norfolk, Virginia, attending a machinists' school. If she sees this in print, perhaps she will write, for I would like to renew our acquaintance if possible. Any others who care to write also, please do so.

RICHARD VIERA

U.S.S. Henley, No. 391,
Pearl Harbor, T. H.

Irish Colleen

Dear Editor:

I am a sixteen-year-old Irish girl with brown eyes and dark hair. I'd like to correspond with people all over the world. I like all kinds of sports and have several collections.

EILEEN SCULLY

49 Clonliffe Ave.,
Ballybough, Dublin, Erie

North of the Border

Dear Editor:

Here are two lively girls who wish to correspond with boys and girls from all over the world. Ruby is seventeen and Barbara is twenty. We enjoy all sports and love to dance.

RUBY PAYSON
BARBARA LORDEN

Ruby Payson,
422 Main St., S.
Barbara Lorden,
82 Lillooet St., W.,
Moose Jaw, Sask., Canada

Friendly Couple

Dear Editor:

We are a young couple with one child living in New York City. We would like to meet other young couples. We are a chauffeur and secretary, have been to California, Florida and Texas on vacations, and prefer those who live in the suburbs and like their own home, flowers, music, books and congenial people. We also delve into minor politics for pleasure.

THE SIROCCOS

519 East 76 St,
New York City

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Made especially for the readers of Ranch Romances, these handsome and amusing charm bracelets are the very latest adornment. Twenty-four carat yellow gold-filled, with five delightful Western charms attached, these newest bracelets cost only twenty-five cents. You'll want one of them whether you own one of the old-style Trail's End bracelets or not.

If you desire one, send this coupon, together with twenty-five cents, to the Trail's End Editor, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York.

I am a member of the Trail's End Club.

I am enclosing twenty-five cents ($.25), for which please send me one Trail's End bracelet.

Name.....

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Corralling the Stars

TIM HOLT

RKO Radio Pictures

START everything in a small way," is Tim Holt's philosophy. The rest of it is pretty important, too. It goes: "And make steady progress—upward." This young cowboy star has hewn to that line with the result that today, at the ripe old age of twenty-three, he's Hollywood's fair-haired boy of Westerns. RKO Radio Pictures, who have him under contract, look forward to keeping him a top-flighter for many years to come. And why not? Tim's famous pa has been tophand for years.

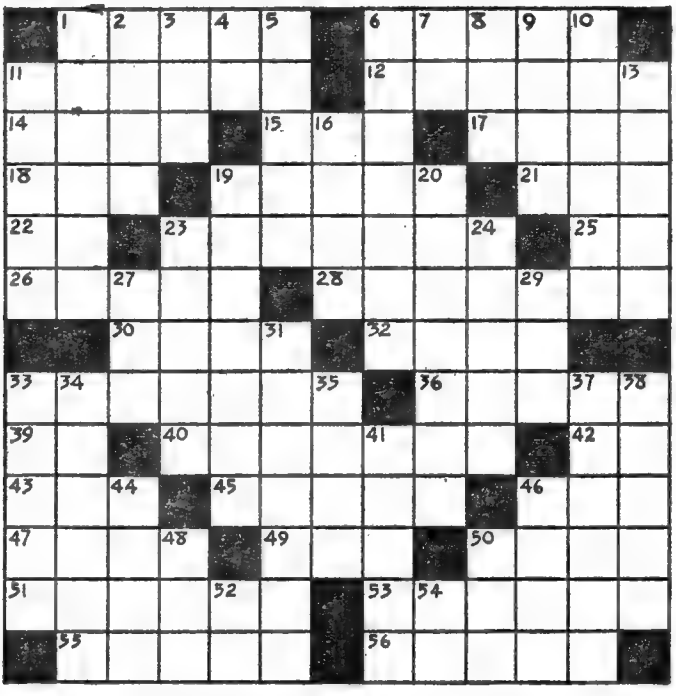
When Tim decided to follow in Pa's footsteps, the family council all but wept. It was a repetition of what had happened when Jack Holt broke away from family tradition. The Holt line hails from Virginia, and it was the unwritten rule in the Holt clan that the men become lawyers like their ancestor, Chief Justice John Marshall, or soldiers like another forebear, General Pickett. But Jack Holt was determined—and so was his son, Tim.

Despite the fact that Tim was born smack into the lap of moviedom, he appeared on the screen only once during his school days. That was when a boy who looked like Jack Holt was desperately needed in a picture. His first adult part was in "Stella Dallas." Since then Tim's made more than twenty films. Remember him in "Stagecoach," and "Swiss Family Robinson," and "Laddie"?

And remember Duke of the gold tail and gold mane and copper-chestnut hair? Duke hails from down Texas way and he's getting into his fourth year. Tim broke and trained him all by himself, and horse and master have quite a lot in common: they're both big, handsome and competent actors to their respective toes.

Tim has seven other horses, all blooded stock. He keeps them on his ranch in the San Fernando Valley, a setting very similar to those which Tim and Duke portray on the silver screen. Tim, like his father, believes in early marriages. Two years ago he walked down the aisle with Mae Ashcraft, a daughter of the East. When little Lance, who's just learning to toddle now, was born, Tim personally added, with the aid of a handyman, some more rooms to his ranch house.

. The Westerners' Crossword Puzzle .



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue.

DEFINITIONS

Across

1. Lodges
6. A river in Texas
11. To tie for branding
12. Makes suitable
14. Affirmative votes
15. A marble
17. A Turkish cone
18. A measure of length
19. To dwarf
21. To fall behind
22. Pint (Abbr.)
23. Oklahomans
25. That is (Abbr.)
26. A title of courtesy (Mex.)
28. Tea vessels
30. Songs
32. Father
33. Writing pads
36. Portions
39. Railroad (Abbr.)
40. Moving at lowest speed
42. An expression of inquiry
43. A branch of learning
45. To refrain from using
46. A Hawaiian flower
47. To lament
49. A unit of light
50. Mere routine
51. A chemical compound
53. Gave an opinion
55. A fur-bearing animal
56. A cowboy

Solution to Third April Puzzle

Down

1. A prairie wolf
2. Very old
3. Mountains (Abbr.)
4. Jumbled type
5. A fight
6. Western Indians
7. Short for a man's name
8. To cover the top of
9. A precious gem
10. A narrow passage
11. Musical instruments
13. Wise men
16. A kinswoman
19. Reddish-brown horses
20. To gad about
23. Stains
24. A kind of fish
27. To seize
29. Over (Contr.)
31. A cork or plug
33. A hobo
34. A gully
35. To swing back and forth
37. To seesaw
38. Started suddenly
41. A mistake
44. Sour
46. Solitary
48. A negative
50. To tear apart
52. A compass point (Abbr.)
54. Post office (Abbr.)

Trail's End Roll Call

From all points of the compass, the members flock to the fold of the Trail's End Club. Welcome, newcomers!

Mr. Bernard Ammon, R. D. 1, Smithville, Ohio

Miss Esther Anderson, 310 S. Glebe Road, Arlington, Va.

Mr. Kinley Atkins, 1543 Vestal Ave., Knoxville, Tenn.

Miss Penelope Aylward, Commercial St., Takaka, New Zealand

Mr. Lloyd Bazeman, Colerain, N. C.

Mr. Joe Bailey, H. & S. Co., 3rd Engineers, Schofield Barracks, Honolulu, T. H.

Mr. Claude Baker, East Andover, Me.

Mr. T. Carr, R. F. C. 2, Box 42, Enterprise, Ala.

Mr. Raymond Clifton, Gen. Del., Tacoma, Wash.

Mr. Harry Cooper, c/o Mr. H. Dunham, R. R. 2, Newmarket, Ont., Canada

Miss Mary Jane Crouse, 649 Spring St., Bethlehem, Penna.

Miss Sue Csengery, 263 Flax Hill Rd., S. Norwalk, Conn.

Miss Marie Davis, Route 2, Box 43-A, Corbin, Ky.

Mr. Jack Deason, Gen. Del., Arvin, Calif.

Mrs. M. J. Derrick, 363 East 116 Place, Los Angeles, Calif.

P.F.C. Charles O. Delvaux, Station Hospital, Ft. Randolph, Canal Zone

Mr. Don F. Deuel, Derby, N. Y.

Mr. Leverne Dorward, Emerald, Penna.

Mr. Gustavus A. Elbow, Station Hospital, Ft. William D. Davis, Canal Zone

Mrs. Ealene Gables, 506 South Fannin St., Tyler, Texas

Miss Mavis Gee, Fairy Springs Road, Rotorua, New Zealand

Miss Beatrice Gerhardt, 3930 Seventeenth St., Detroit, Mich.

Mr. Don Glanzman, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa

Miss R. M. Hanson, c/o Fred Hanson, Lebanon, S. Dak.

Miss Gale Harper, 3626 Hayward Ave., Baltimore, Md.

Mr. Charles Hawkins, Military Police, Ft. Armstrong, Honolulu, T. H.

Miss Florence Harris, Oyster Point, Va.

Mr. Ronald Harry, Ashcroft, B. C., Canada

Mr. Holley Hensley, 72nd R. A. (A.A.), Ft. Randolph Battery, Canal Zone

Mrs. Helen Lape, R. D. 2, Sinking Springs, Penna.

Miss Betty Lorence, 29 E. Cicotte St., River Rouge, Mich.

Mr. Walter Lough, 112 Greenwood Pl., Bridgeville, Penna.

Miss Mary Luke, 714 Blaw Ave., Blawnox, Penna.

Mr. Delbert Magart, R. F. D. 5, Spokane, Wash.

Mr. Robert Magness, 3rd Co., Neo. Training School, Ft. Belvoir, Va.

Miss June Massell, 620 Ninth Ave., N.W., Calgary, Alta., Canada

Miss Lucyle Nelson, Box 62, Lyons, Kans.

Miss Ina Newcomb, Brewster, Mass.

Mr. Herman Nicolaisen, R. R. 1, Max, N. Dak.

Miss Molly Norling, Mesa, Wash.

TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

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I want to become a member of Trail's End Club.

(Miss)

(Mrs.)

(Mr.)

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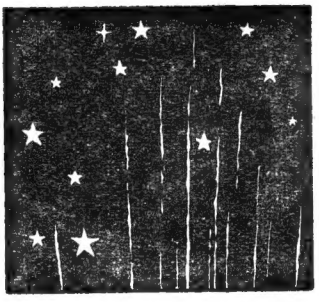
City .....

State .....

This coupon makes you a member of America's greatest outdoor club.
Ten cents brings you the lovely "Trail's End" pin.
Address your letter: Trail's End Club, c/o Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York City.

Please *print* your name and address plainly. 5-9-41



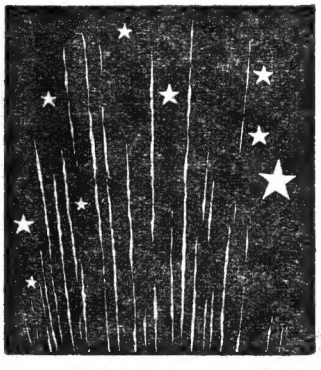
Girl of
Taurus
Apr. 22 — May 21

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

By Professor Marcus Mari

Born Under Your Sign: Alice Faye, Margaret Sullavan, Shirley Temple, Bing Crosby, Tyrone Power, James Stewart.

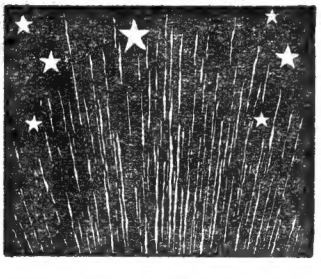
Your Attributes



Yours is a placid, kindly heart and mind, girl of Taurus. And, like the Bull for which Taurus stands, you have true strength. Although slow to anger, slow to pass judgment, once you have decided on a course of action, nothing can stop you. You are the true homemaker, the ideal mother type, the understanding sweetheart. You have great endurance, complete self-control. You are calmly assured within yourself and do not suffer the tortures of your more uncertain sisters. You are "choosy" about your friends, particular about your surroundings. You hate anything tawdry or loud. And you can always rely on your own good taste. Beauty and health are in your sign.

★

What You Should Beware of



There is a touch of obstinacy in your make-up. Learn to give in! And learn to let go! That is, try to curb that tendency you have of being too reserved, too withdrawn from gayety, for despite your proclivities for stage and screen, there is much of the Puritan in you, and a touch of sadness. Your nature is a secretive one. You do not confide easily, and many people will feel that you are aloof because of this. You want a great deal from life, but you are more likely to sit back and expect it to come to you than to go out and grab it with both hands.

★

Your True Mate

Since no sacrifice is too great for you to make for the man you love, you subject yourself to being imposed upon. If you are, it is entirely your own doing, for you can demand and get the best in a man. Your maternal instincts are so strong that you may mistake pity for love at some time in your life. But once real love is yours, you need not fear losing your mate. Your life-mate should appreciate your fundamental need of home and children; he should be, for your greatest happiness, a truly strong character.

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends this coupon to him in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name_____ **Sex**_____

Address_____

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Exact date of birth: Year_____ **Month**_____ **Day**_____ 5-9-41

The 97 Pound Weakling

—Who became "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"

"I'll prove that YOU too can be a NEW MAN!"

—Charles Atlas

I KNOW, myself, what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs! I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

Then I discovered *"Dynamic Tension."* It gave me a body that won for me the title "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

When I say I can make you over into a man of giant power and energy, I know what I'm talking about. I've seen my new system, *"Dynamic Tension,"* transform hundreds of weak, puny men into Atlas Champions.

Only 15 Minutes a Day

Do you want big, broad shoulders—a fine, powerful chest—biceps like steel—arms and legs ripping with muscular strength—a stomach ridged with bands of sinewy muscle—and a build you can be proud of? Then just give me the opportunity to prove that *"Dynamic Tension"* is what you need.

No "ifs," "ands," or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, pepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about *"Dynamic Tension"* and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

"Dynamic Tension" is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it's actually fun! *"Dynamic Tension"* does the work.

Send for FREE BOOK

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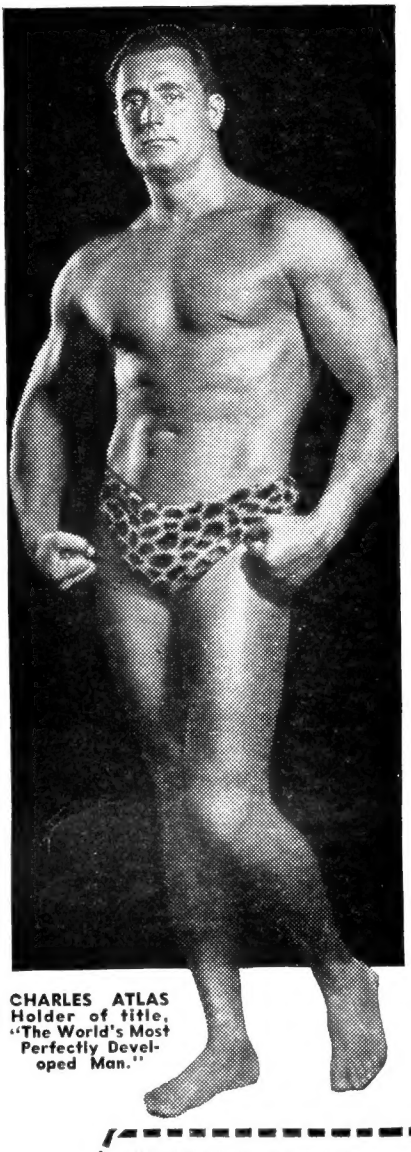

CHARLES ATLAS
Holder of title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

CHARLES ATLAS,
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115 East 23rd Street,
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I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me — give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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Bankers new copyrighted "Same Day Pay" Policy authorizes your local home town bank to pay claims *in full*, in strict accordance with the terms of the policy. Think what it will mean to you to have this great policy—at only a few cents a day!

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